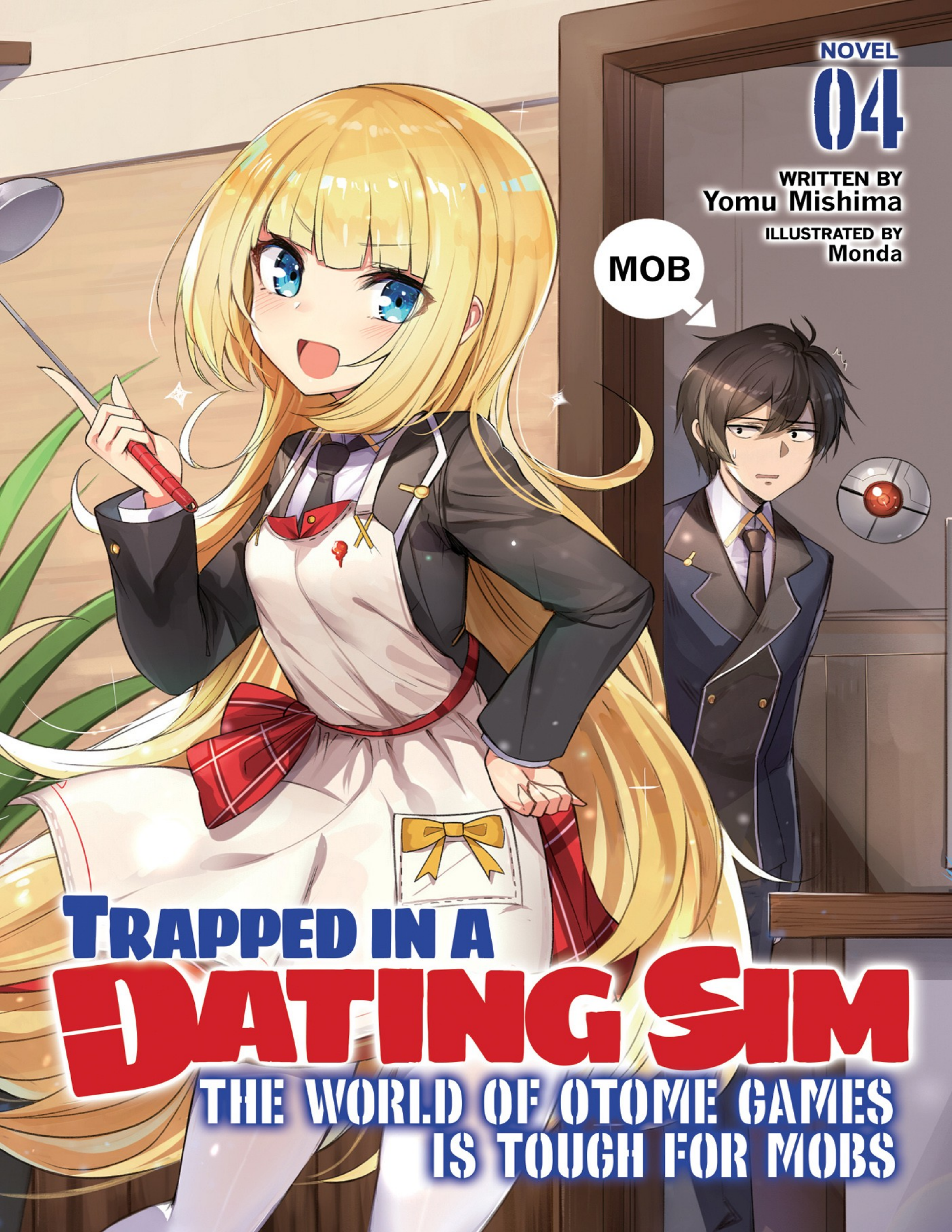

NOVEL
04
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY
Monda
MOB
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

Table of Contents

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Pierre was right. If you were gullible enough to let someone fool you, then you deserved everything you got.
Arroganz pointed at me, looking every bit the villain now. "It's too late to apologize. You won't get my forgiveness!"
"It's your own fault. You played right into my hands!"
PIERRE IO FEIVEL
I took the glove out of my pocket and pulled it on.
"What?" Pierre cackled. "You plan to fight me like that?"
I put my hand on my hip and stared at him.
"Enough. Let's do this."
LEON FOU BARTFORT


NOELLE BELTRE
LOUISE SARA RAULT
“Uh? What’s going on here? Hey, Luxion, help me out.”
“Don’t thank me. Why don’t you come with me now?”
“No way. We already have plans.”

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

NOVEL
04

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY
MONDA

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 4

Illustrations by Monda

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CONTENTS

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

Prologue

RELATIONSHIPS ARE FUNNY THINGS. They're difficult to cultivate when you want them, and they fall apart so easily. Then there are the relationships that you can't escape, even if you want to.

My name is Leon Fou Bartfort, and I was standing on the *Einhorn*'s deck, holding a scrubbing brush under the blinding sun with my sleeves and pant legs rolled up.

As you might have guessed from the vessel's name, the *Einhorn*'s most eye-catching feature was the horn protruding from its bow. The ship was painted wine-red, accented with gold and silver plating, and it measured about two hundred meters long. Despite its aristocratic exterior, it had been built by my partner, Luxion. As such, the inside couldn't have been more different from most ships in this world.

I was heading to the Alzer Republic with plans to study abroad. Let's just call it a stroke of bad luck. I was a mere student, but I'd somehow managed to land the title of earl, and that meant I had to travel in style. Hence the ship.

"Hey, you better listen up, you morons!" I yelled from the deck.

A group of people stood in front of me, including the wicked witch herself, Marie Fou Lafan. Marie looked dainty, but she was surprisingly resilient. The wind blew through her golden hair, and she reached up to pin it back with her hand.

In my previous life, she'd been my little sister, and until recently, the two of us had been bitter foes. I'd never dreamed we'd known each other before we reincarnated here. It didn't seem fair that I'd been reborn in a new world only to somehow still end up stuck with this pest.

"This is against my will," I complained. "*Entirely* against my will! But since I have no choice, I'll be looking after you all. Having said that, don't expect to get fed if you can't work for yourselves!"

Julius Rapha Holfort and his friends glowered at me, cleaning utensils in hand. Still, he didn't have much right to whine. After the war against House Fanoss, Julius was a prince in name only.

"It's not as though *we're* pleased with this situation either," Julius complained, the wind whipping through his navy-blue hair.

He looked away, displeasure written all over his face. He pissed me off. Okay, so it wasn't just him. They *all* pissed me off.

He and the other guys on my ship were all love interests from the stupid otome game I'd somehow ended up living in, and none of them seemed much happier about that than I was.

The first to speak up was Jilk Fia Marmoria, Julius's foster brother, his green hair pulled back in a ponytail. "His Highness is right. I have no desire

to be ‘looked after,’ and least of all by you. I have only joined you because Her Majesty ordered me to do so.”

Jilk was a scheming and dastardly worm, and I was in no mood to put up with him.

“And if Her Majesty hadn’t ordered *me* to look after *you*,” I said, “then you’d all be fish food by now. Be grateful, you useless louts.”

My words fell on deaf ears.

As I did my best to put them in their place, Greg Fou Seberg glared back at me defiantly. He had spiky short hair and a noticeably toned body.

“Bartfort, it’s not as though we *want* to go to Alzer with you.”

Yeah, same here, buddy. I laughed dryly. “What a coincidence, because I don’t want to go either. On top of that, I have to deal with you jerks! What kind of nightmare is this?”

Chris Fia Arclight was the next to complain. He pushed his glasses up his nose under side-parted blue hair. This guy was a genius with a sword. Some even said he could be the next Sword Saint. While Greg tended to be hotheaded, Chris was more calm and analytical. “If you’re so against studying abroad, you could have simply stayed in Holfort.”

Yeah, that’s exactly what I wanted to do!

Alas, sitting around would only have made me anxious. That was how I’d ended up in this mess.

“No more complaints, loser patrol,” I told them. “This is my ship, so you’d better do as I say. Just get that through your thick skulls, all right?”

Originally, I’d been tasked with heading to the Alzer Republic alone, but unfortunately some scumbag—cough cough, King Roland, cough cough—had put me on babysitting duty. Even then, I’d only gone along with it because Miss Mylene asked for my help. She was just too adorable to resist.

The last member of the idiot brigade was the narcissistic Brad Fou Field. He shrugged and shook his head. His long purple hair was pulled over his shoulder in a low ponytail. This spoiled brat was known for his excellent grades and skill with magic, but beyond that, he was pretty useless. “Who would have dreamed we would be studying together?” he said. “It would appear that the bond between us is as unbreakable as it is undesirable.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth!” I agreed. “I’m busy enough as it is. I don’t have time to play nanny to you creeps!”

They exchanged looks and muttered to each other.

Meanwhile, Kyle, Marie’s elf boy slave, gave the love interests a chilly look. “I do envy their ignorance a little,” he told Marie. “At least *we* won’t need to worry about where our next meal is coming from.”

Marie nodded. “Good point. We won’t go hungry so long as we’re with my bro—with Leon, I mean.”

The last member of our group was Carla Fou Wayne, who’d decided to join Marie’s entourage after Marie saved her from some bullies. Carla had a slender build and long, straight, navy-blue hair. “It is certainly a relief not to have to worry about food, Lady Marie!” she agreed.

The three of them seemed so genuinely happy about not starving.

Just…what kind of lives have you been living until now? I thought, hiding my face behind my hand. I wiped away my tears and turned back to bark at the idiot brigade. “Until we arrive in the Alzer Republic, you lot are in charge of cleaning the ship. You’ll earn three hundred dia a day. Once we dock, I’ll convert the total into the local currency and pay you in full.”

Julius’s eyes went wide. “Such a pitiful sum—are you trying to insult us?”

What was this guy talking about? That was almost three hundred U.S. dollars a day *just* for cleaning! Yet they all looked completely shocked.

“You’re a tyrant!” Jilk stepped back as though he couldn’t stand to be near me.

“You intend to force us to *clean* for that pittance?” Brad’s face contorted with confusion. “This is absurd!”

My shoulders slumped in exasperation. “What’s absurd is the incredible distance between your brains and the real world. Most people would jump at the chance for three hundred dia for a simple cleaning job. I’m being profoundly generous!”

With Luxion around, the *Einhorn* didn’t need a crew. That meant cleaning was the only real labor left to do. It seemed like the least these bums could do to earn their keep. I was even benevolent enough to offer them a salary, and they treated me like some kind of despot!

“Bartfort!” Greg declared, taking up a battle stance with his deck brush. “I challenge you to a duel! If I win, you shall treat us with more dignity!”

Was he serious? I was actually starting to pity these guys.

“Save the jokes for after you’ve finished working,” I said. “And make it more obvious that you’re messing around next time. I almost took you seriously.”

“I am *deadly* serious.”

I sighed and covered my face.

“How can anyone be allowed to treat another person like this?” Chris demanded, clenching his jaw.

All I was doing was asking them to work a normal day, and with a two-hour break in the middle. The way they were acting, you’d think I was out for their blood.

“You lot really are useless,” I moaned.

As they shot me angry looks, Marie was already heading inside with a bucket and mop. “Come on, Kyle. You too, Carla. Let’s get this over with.”

“Sounds good!” Kyle agreed. “This place is already pretty clean. I guess we just need to tidy the hallway and scrub the toilets?”

“Oh, I’ll do the lady’s restroom, Lady Marie!” Carla offered.

At least they seemed to be in good spirits.

“I can’t believe he’s offering them so much just to clean. My bro—ahem, I mean, Leon—sure is a sucker,” Marie said to herself as they disappeared inside.

For someone so skilled at manipulating people, she seemed to have a lot of trouble keeping things to herself. Even after being saddled with the band of blockheads, I found it kind of endearing. What was wrong with me?
“Bartfort!” Greg shouted again. “I demand a duel!”
I shot him an icy look before turning my gaze up at the sky. How did I end up stuck with these morons? And why am I headed for the Alzer Republic instead of enjoying my engagement to two beautiful women?
How could I have known that this awful otome game had a sequel?!
“I wonder how the two of them are doing…?” I muttered to myself.
“Hey!” Greg shouted. “Don’t ignore me!”
I turned my back on these yapping fools and started cleaning the deck.
“Baaaaaaaaartfoooooooort!”
“Oh, put a sock in it,” I grumbled. “You morons need to shut your traps and get cleaning.”
I brandished my broom in his direction, and that shut him up.
Just my luck, having to miss my honeymoon because of a stupid job transfer—I’m a stereotype! Why me?!

***

Back at the academy in Holfort, Olivia was in her room getting changed. Her uniform waited on its hanger, the patch on her jacket testament to her rank as a knight.
Livia had earned a medal for her service in the war against the former Principality of Fanoss. Her bright, flax-colored bob bounced around her chin. She had clear blue eyes, a gentle aura, and soft, voluptuous breasts.
“I wonder if I should buy a new one? But they’re all so expensive…” she waffled, reaching for her shirt.
Before she could decide either way, there was an urgent knock at her door.
“Livia? It’s me.”
Angie Rapha Redgrave. She, like Livia, was engaged to Leon.
“Oh, yes, come in,” Livia said without thinking, shortly before realizing that she was still in her underwear. “Uh, um…oh, no!”
She scrambled to pull on her skirt, lost her balance, and collapsed onto the floor just as the door swung open. Angie stepped inside, her fair hair braided and pulled back into a bun.
“Livia, a letter from Leon has just… Wait. What are you doing?”



“Owie,” Livia whimpered, slumped on the floor with her butt jutting up into the air.
Angie had an unflappably dignified air. When she saw Livia sprawled out on the floor, she frowned and offered her a hand. Angie’s uniform did little to hide her slender, fit form. Her breasts were larger than Livia’s, but they swelled despite their weight—perhaps a byproduct of her refinement and composure.
Livia reached for Angie’s hand, and Angie pulled her easily to her feet.
“Sorry,” Livia laughed, trying to play it off. “I tripped.”
“You know there’s no need to rush on my account,” said Angie. “And besides, I think you’ll want to see this.”
She turned her gaze to the white sphere floating beside her. It was about the size of a softball, with a large blue eye smack dab in the middle. Aside from the difference in color scheme, Cleare was practically identical to Luxion.
“I have an email from Master!” Cleare declared, happily circling the two girls.
“An email?” Livia asked. “What’s that?”
“Apparently it’s similar to a letter,” Angie explained. “But you can exchange correspondence without having to write anything down on paper.”
“These Lost Items sure are incredible,” said Livia, staring at Cleare in wonder.
Angie passed her a printed copy of the message. “It sounds like Prince Julius and the others are already making trouble for themselves.”
Livia read the missive over and a troubled smile rose to her lips.

Are the two of you well? I’m already exhausted.

The beginning sounded rather ominous, but it seemed like Leon was in good health—although he did have a number of complaints about his traveling companions.

Jilk went into a frenzy again today and started kicking up a fuss.
“Your treatment of us is unfair!”
I snorted and kicked their butts, but it only turned into a big, messy fight.

“Is Mr. Leon really all right?” Livia wondered.
“He’s fine,” said Cleare. “After all, he has Luxion with him. If anyone tries anything funny, Luxion will dispose of them without a trace.”
Unfortunately, her verbal tics were just as unsettling as Luxion’s.
Angie frowned. “You had better not ‘dispose’ of anyone. Not under any circumstances, understood?”
“Oh, I see—you’re secretly telling me that I should dispose of *all* of them, yes?”

“No! I meant exactly what I said, and you know it. Why would you even say something like that?”
As the two of them bantered, Livia finished reading Leon’s email.

It’s lonely here without you both. I’m already homesick.

“Oh, Mr. Leon…” Livia murmured, clutching the paper.
“That part is just lip service,” Cleare chimed in helpfully.
“Sorry?”
According to Cleare, Leon was doing fine on his own. Still, it made Livia smile to read his message. Leon was no different from when he had left.
“I’m glad he’s doing all right,” she said.
Angie nodded. “Indeed. We need to stay strong too. Speaking of which, aren’t you supposed to be taking those scholarship students on a tour of the academy today?”
“Oh, goodness! That’s right!” Livia cried. “I need to get ready!”
She scrambled to pull on her uniform, and Angie was quick to lend a hand. Cleare watched them both through her single blue eye.

***

I was in the dining hall with Marie while Luxion floated beside me. It was easy to forget that the metal sphere and single red eye wasn’t his real body—that he was actually a remote terminal for an entire spaceship.
“So,” Luxion said dispassionately. “The Alzer Republic is rich in resources and exports many of those goods abroad?”
Marie straightened from scrubbing the table and stretched. “Correct.”
“In other words, they’re a resource powerhouse, and their Sacred Tree is as large as a mountain?”
That was all news to me. I mean, I hadn’t even known that this stupid game *had* a sequel. As such, I was facing a serious information shortage. That’s where Marie came in. However, there was just one problem.
“And you don’t know anything else about this place?” Luxion asked.
“I already told you!” Marie said. “It’s been a long time since I played, okay? My memory is kinda fuzzy. And you can’t honestly expect me to remember *every* detail!”
I sprayed the table down with alcohol and polished it with a rag. “The information Miss Mylene gave us was more valuable than anything you’ve said,” I muttered.
According to Mylene, the Alzer Republic’s religion was centered around their Sacred Tree. It was the symbol of their control and smack-dab in the middle of their territory. Its roots extended beneath the six different lands, tying them together. Each land was ruled by one of the Six Great Houses, who came together to make any important decisions, making the country an aristocratic republic.

Even the Holfort Kingdom got its magic stones like Suspension Stones from the Alzer Republic. Holfort had once tried to invade, but they'd suffered a humiliating defeat in the war that followed. Since then, the two countries had managed to cultivate diplomatic ties.

The Holfort Kingdom wasn't alone in its lust for Alzer's resources. Over the years, other countries had set their eyes on the republic, only for them to face defeat as well. While it was on point to describe the Alzer Republic as a resource powerhouse, you would have been remiss not to mention that in the history of their nation, they'd never lost a defensive battle.

As we pestered Marie for more details, she paused to comb her shaky memory. "They're called the Six Great Houses now," she said. "But there used to be seven."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that from Miss Mylene—that 'the house in charge of their joint assembly was driven to ruin a decade ago' or something."

"Bingo. The daughter of that fallen house is the protagonist of the second game."

"What's her name?"

"Her last name is Beltre, but it's an alias. In the game, the player is free to choose her first name. She has pink twintails and tends to be candid. I remember her dialogue choices being pretty lively."

"That's unexpected," I admitted. "Usually otome heroines are quiet and reserved."

"It's because the protagonist in the first game was such a dingbat," Marie laughed. "Everyone hated her. I assume that's why they made the protagonist for the sequel more outspoken. Either way, she's leagues better."

I shot her an icy glare. "Don't you *dare* say that in front of Livia."

Marie averted her gaze. "I-I won't!"

Luxion continued to study her. "I would appreciate if you could tell us more about the story of the second game."

Marie paused for a moment. "Um, well, first of all, the protagonist enrolls at the republic's academy. Their curriculum is fairly advanced, but commoners are allowed to attend as well. That's where she hooks up with her love interests."

"So education isn't restricted to the upper classes? For an aristocracy, that's quite the bold move," said Luxion. "Educating the larger population risks engendering revolutionary ideals. Don't they feel threatened by that?"

"As if I'd have any idea! It's just a video game. It's not based on logic."

"That was quite candid of you."

Marie ignored him. "The last boss is the head of House Rault. They're the ones who ruined the protagonist's family. According to the lore, the head of House Rault was once rejected by the protagonist's mother. That's why he ruined her family."

I snorted. The chairman of their whole assembly was from the protagonist's house, and this guy destroyed them just because he got rejected? Wow.

Otome games sure are something else. Maybe it's just this series in particular that's off the rails?

"Are you telling me that he destabilized his entire government over such a petty grievance?" Luxion asked.

I wasn't so skeptical. I was too busy laughing at the cliché of it all.

"It's just like the first game," I said. "Man, all otome games are the same. 'The protagonist looks like an ordinary person, but she's secretly harboring amazing power and a unique bloodline!' Am I right?"

"Your dating sims aren't any different," Marie shot back. "They slap on different art, but the story never changes."

"Don't lump them together! My dating sims are all unique, okay?"

"Well, they look the same to me!"

Why was she coming for my beloved dating sims out of nowhere?!

As we argued, Luxion interrupted. "Please return to the original topic."

Marie pouted. "The love interests are all members of the remaining Six Great Houses. The protagonist hooks up with one of them, reclaims her house's former glory, and lives happily ever after."

I understood the whole romance aspect well enough, but that was hardly our main problem.

"So what happens with the last boss?" I asked. "If we leave him unchecked, will he obliterate the world?"

"I have no idea," said Marie. "I just figured it'd be a bad idea not to. After all, the last boss is the Sacred Tree."

I blinked. "Huh? Hold up, you *literally* just said that House Rault was the last boss!"

"The head of House Rault *fuses* with the Sacred Tree!" Marie snapped. She paused, and then her face lit up. "Oh, I just remembered something about that! The Sacred Tree's energy is channeled throughout the republic. That's why they sell all their Suspension Stones to foreign powers. The Sacred Tree's roots extend all over their land, so you can get natural energy from anywhere in Alzer."

That *was* pretty incredible. So it seemed their bountiful resources were thanks, in part, to the Sacred Tree.

"Seriously? And that tree is the last boss?"

"Yeah. It lifts itself out of the ground, transforms into some grotesque monster, and descends into a frenzy. It's ridiculously huge and leaves terrible devastation in its wake. The protagonist defeats it, and then she plants a special item—a sapling that replaces the old Sacred Tree. After that, she's selected to be some kind of Priestess, and her lover becomes the Tree's Guardian."

I really didn't give a crap about this Priestess and Guardian nonsense, but we couldn't ignore this last boss.

That was when an idea hit me.

"Hold on, wouldn't it solve everything if Luxion just destroyed the Sacred Tree now? We could get rid of it before it has time to wreak havoc."

Marie nodded energetically. “You’re right! As long as the last boss is out of the picture, we shouldn’t have a problem. Okay, Luxion, it’s time to whip out that deadly weapon of yours. Go, destructo-beam, go!”
We both turned to my companion expectantly.
“Are you certain about this?” Luxion asked.
“I mean, if we have to defeat it anyway, we might as well strike first.”
“What I am asking is: Are you certain you want to obliterate the entire republic?”
“Huh?” What about destroying that tree meant wiping out an entire country? I wasn’t following. That’s when it hit me. “Wait a minute, why would defeating the last boss…oh!”
Marie tilted her head in confusion. “What? Why can’t you just destroy it and be done with all of this?”
“You moron. If we get rid of that tree, the whole country literally falls apart!”
“Why?”
“Because it’s the foundation of their economy!”
Thanks to the Sacred Tree, the republic could export all the magic stones it excavated. If the tree was destroyed, they would lose their primary energy resource and would have to depend on those stones instead. They would lose a vital industry and all of the profits that came with it. Though they’d probably destroy themselves well before that in the chaos that followed the death of the tree. It would be the kind of apocalyptic scenario my old world would have faced if it suddenly lost all electricity.
Marie blanched as that sunk in. “I-In that case, we have no choice but to destroy it *after* it becomes the last boss.”
That was the safest route. I certainly didn’t want to shoulder the burden of decimating an entire country.
I nodded. “Yeah, guess we’ll just have to hope the protagonist and her lover can fulfill their duty.”
Our only role would be to make sure she made contact with her love interests so that their relationships could blossom. At least, that was my plan.
“By the way,” Luxion chimed in, “you mentioned a Sacred Tree Sapling. Will that be capable of producing energy on the same scale as its predecessor?”
“Yeah, that doesn’t seem likely,” I said. “Marie?” She’d described the original tree as being as large as a mountain. There was no way a sapling could generate the same kind of power.
Our questions made Marie frown, looking doubtful herself. “Um, well…in the game, that was the happy ending. I have no idea what happened to the country’s economy in the aftermath.”
“Well, what the heck are we gonna do? At this rate, the kingdom will be in trouble too.”

Luxion bobbed in agreement. “Indeed. Holfort relies on the Alzer Republic for Suspension Stones. The kingdom isn’t completely dependent upon them, but the republic is one of their primary sources of energy.”
“Don’t ask me!” Marie blurted out, frustrated. “I don’t have *all* the answers! There was no talk in the game about how things turned out politically, okay?!”
I frowned. Well, now what? Seems like the Alzer Republic is screwed on multiple fronts.
As Marie and I fell silent, Julius waltzed in. The moment he spotted us, he raced over.
“Marie, are you all right?!” He checked her over and then glowered at me. “Bartfort, I won’t allow you to get so close to her!”
“Yeah, listen… Her chest is as flat as her back, and that’s not really my thing, so you have nothing to worry about. Anyway, get back to work.”
What was with these buffoons? I could hardly even talk to Marie without one of them losing his wee little mind.
“E-excuse me!” Marie grumped. “They might be small, but I *do* have breasts, you know!”
It was like someone pointing at plains and calling them mountains.
Julius wasn’t going to take my insult lying down either. “Marie is a wonderful woman!”
“Oh, yeah? That’s great. Well, I have Angie and Livia, so I’ll never be interested in her.”
I would *never* make such a mistake. Angie’s daddy didn’t seem the type to let infidelity go unpunished. My head would be forfeit—right out a window. Not that I would cheat in the first place. *I swear, I would never.*
Julius stood protectively in front of Marie, effectively blocking us from talking any further.
I sighed and trudged out of the dining hall. “I seriously can’t even.”

***

Julius waited for Leon to leave the dining hall and then turned to Marie. “He didn’t do anything to you, did he?” he asked gently.
Marie’s expression was heavy with exhaustion. “I’m fine. Besides, Leon would never put his hands on me.”
“He *is* a man, you realize. There is no such thing as being too careful.”
Marie had no idea how to reply. Her shoulders slumped. “Julius, I’m going to get back to cleaning. You should too.”
“But wait!”
Marie nudged his back. “Just go!”
“But Marie, I want to be with you!”
“We’ll never get done cleaning at this rate! Return to your station!”
Having been driven out of the cafeteria, Julius stumbled upon Luxion floating around in the hallway. Julius took it upon himself to deliver a list of

his complaints. “Hey, your master has his own fianceés, so why’s he cozying up to Marie?” Julius thrust a finger at Luxion. “You better keep a close eye on him!”
“Do not give me orders,” the robot replied coldly. “Return to your work.”
Luxion was usually so obedient to Leon that his brusque manner took Julius by surprise. The prince gaped. “I-I…”
Luxion had already turned his attention to Leon, who was walking down the hallway with his deck brush on his shoulder.
“Luxion, I’m starving. Let’s eat.”
“Master, there’s still forty-five minutes until our lunch break.”
“Who cares? Let’s get some grub.”
“Oh, well. I suppose I have no choice.”
Luxion grumbled at his master’s demands, but the nature of their relationship was undeniable. Something about it got under Julius’s skin.
“Wh-what’s his problem? Honestly!”

***

Back in Holfort Kingdom, Livia was giving the scholarship students a tour. She hugged her binder of documents to her chest. “Well, I think that’s everything,” she said. “Do you have any questions?”
Although these students weren’t of the nobility, they were largely still wealthy. As sons and daughters of affluent merchants and the like, they seemed like lords and ladies to Livia. Although there were a few oddballs in the mix—a couple of people who’d made names for themselves as adventurers. All of them were over sixteen, and some were even older than Livia. One of them raised his hand.
Livia glanced through her notes for his name. “Yes, um… Mr. Curtis?”
Curtis brushed his long bangs out of his eyes. “I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend this academy,” he said with a confident air. “If I might, Miss Olivia, do you happen to be single?”
Some of the students rolled their eyes while others laughed. Curtis didn’t seem to notice any of them.
“I have a wonderful fiancé,” Livia answered with a smile.
Curtis’s shoulders sagged. “That is a shame. If only I had met you sooner.”
Apparently he wasn’t the type to chase girls if they were taken.
Behind Curtis was a tall boy named Aaron. He had shoulder-length brown hair and a headband to pin back his bangs. His sleeves were rolled up, and the front of his uniform was hanging open, exposing toned muscles.
Disgusting, he thought. These rich boys make me want to vomit. That said…
His eyes glinted as he gazed at Olivia. The kingdom had invited him to attend the academy because of his numerous accomplishments as an adventurer. He’d made light of the whole thing at first but enrolled anyway, figuring it might be fun to try the student lifestyle. And there was a very good reason for that…

It’s been a while since I went to school. May as well enjoy it to the fullest. This is my second life, and I plan on playing around to my heart’s content.

Like Leon and Marie, he had also reincarnated into the game.

Maybe I’ll start by messing with this Olivia girl. She said she’s engaged, but what do I care?

He set his dark sights on her.

Chapter 1:
The Alzer Republic

WE HAD ALMOST REACHED the Alzer Republic. I could see the land in the distance, but more eye-catching than that was the enormous tree that blurrily overshadowed the horizon. It was so vast that I could have sworn it was a mirage.

“Maybe it only looks that big because the land is tiny?”

“It’s a major country,” Luxion replied dryly. “That is by no means a small land mass.”

“Okay, but that tree is waaaay too big. I know they said it was the size of a mountain, but seriously?!”

This world had continents that floated in the air. There was little that could surprise me at this point, but even my jaw dropped at the scale of this so-called Sacred Tree.

“So, we’ve finally reached the Alzer Republic, huh?” I mused.

“You had quite the relaxing ride here. How are your language skills coming along?”

“I can get by in everyday conversation.” I had learned some of the local language in class, but actually speaking it was a different matter. I’d done some studying on the ship, but my skills still left a lot to be desired. *Ah well, I can pick up the rest while I’m here.*

“Very well,” said Luxion. “And I can fill the holes and help interpret.”

I stared at him. “You can do that?!”

“Quite.”

“Then why didn’t you say so?! I wasted so much time studying!”

“I thought it would be a good way for you to fill your hours on the trip, especially given your penchant for lazing about.”

I guess it *had* helped me pass the time, even though it had only taken us a few days to reach the republic. We could have made it in a single day if we’d hurried, but I was supposed to contact the kingdom when I got there, so I opted to mosey. If our journey was too fast, the kingdom might get suspicious about my supposed lack of Lost Items.

I stared out across the water toward the republic. “I wonder how the game is proceeding.”

Had the protagonist already met her love interests?

I glanced over at Luxion, but before he could answer, a shadow fell over the *Einhorn*.

“Clouds?” I peered up to discover the belly of another ship overheard. “Someone’s flying over us? What kind of idiot does that?”

It was considered poor manners to fly over another vessel.

“They claim they are part of the republic’s garrison,” Luxion announced. “And they are closing in on us. Shall I shoot them down?”

“No, don’t even think about it. Although it sure is rude of them to greet us like this.”
“They are being quite haughty. They are demanding we allow them to inspect our ship.”
Haughty, you say?

***

Marie and the others had gathered in the *Einhorn*’s dining hall.
“Master, we have finally arrived in the republic,” said Kyle.
“The latest airships sure are impressive,” Carla added. “It’s hard to believe we made it here so quickly.”
In truth, Luxion’s ship was light-years ahead of the other vessels in this world.
“Technology aside, the important thing is we made it here on schedule,” said Marie.
It was certainly a relief. Marie glanced over at her love interests, who seemed like the only passengers who still wanted to complain.
“We finally got to go on a voyage with Marie, and it was a total waste,” Julius grumbled. He had been dead set on enjoying this trip.
Jilk nodded. “I agree. I will never forgive Bartfort for this.”
You guys lost everything we had! Marie thought. I hardly think you have any business treating this like a cruise.
They had caused so many problems in Holfort that they had been practically forced to leave.
Greg stretched his arms. “I’m sick to death of cleaning. Feel like I’ve scrubbed enough to last a lifetime.”
Cleaning is a natural part of everyday life! Marie thought, becoming annoyed. You think a couple days of tidying is worth a lifetime of necessary labor?!
But these were the former heirs of great houses. Most of them had never even picked up a mop before.
Chris turned to Brad. “I haven’t been able to train as much as I would have liked these past few days.”
“Yeah, I wasn’t able to work on my magic much either. Plus, I wanted some time to brush up on my language skills before we arrived.”
Their pampered upbringing had provided them all with personal tutors, so they spoke Alzerian like natives. It made Marie quite jealous.
Meanwhile, I struggled to learn with Kyle and Carla.
Leon had allowed them to take shorter shifts in order to study. When Marie wasn’t cleaning, she was cramming.
I nearly forgot that these guys are all blue-blooded nobles.
Their childhoods had doubtless been remarkably different from hers, but considering how awful they’d grown up to be, Marie didn’t envy them that.

Julius beamed at her. “At least we will be free of this oppression once we reach the republic. We can make up for lost time.”
Marie’s face went blank. Oppression? Uh, I’m actually pretty happy here. Sure, there was work to do, but Leon ensured she had three square meals a day and a bed to call her own. She even got breaks and extra time to study. No, she had thoroughly enjoyed their voyage. Having Leon around was a great relief, and she had no qualms about how he ran things. If she had any problems, they all started with these guys.
Jilk flashed a smile at her. “Now we can enjoy studying together, Miss Marie.”
Marie wrinkled her nose. Yeah, and where exactly are we going to get money to enjoy ourselves?!
After all the issues her boys had caused back home, Holfort Kingdom had cut their allowance to the bare minimum. They weren’t in a position to afford any luxuries.
Greg grinned. “I sure am lookin’ forward to this. Speaking of, I heard the republic has quite a few dungeons. We could all go adventuring together.”
Granted, if there really were dungeons, Marie wanted to explore them and make as much money as possible.
“A fine idea,” said Chris. “I hear the republic’s dungeons are overflowing with magic stones. I am anxious to explore.”
It seemed like an odd thing to look forward to, but Marie felt a growing affection for the two of them. *Greg, Chris… I was right to believe in the two of you. Let’s make a profit this time!*
They were flat broke, so if there were dungeons they could plunder for cash, Marie was eager to get started.
“I’m not sure that will be possible,” Brad cut in, taking the wind out of their sails. “I heard that they don’t teach adventurers at this academy. In the republic, the profession is considered little more than grunt work.”
Come to think of it, he’s right. Although it couldn’t hurt to visit a dungeon anyway. Just once, to fill our pockets.
The Alzer Republic didn’t share the same origins as Holfort, where the nobility was descended from adventurers. Here, adventurers were looked down upon. In fact, they were seen as little more than laborers hauling magic stones.
As their group chatted away in the dining hall, the ship trembled slightly.
“What’s going on?” Kyle asked, peering outside. “It’s never done that before.”
Carla nestled close to Marie. “Do you think there’s been an accident?”
Marie remained calm as she approached the window. She trusted Luxion to take care of any issue, no matter how large or small. “I’m sure that’s not it,” she said. “The ship just rocked a little. Oh! It looks like another airship has come to meet us.”
It had drawn up beside the *Einhorn*.

Julius slid up beside Marie and peeked out. “It’s the Alzer Republic’s way of hazing outsiders.”
“Hazing?” Marie asked.
“Everyone talks about it. The republic makes a fortune from exporting magic stones, and their defenses are unparalleled. All that good fortune has inflated their egos.”
Before he could finish, republic soldiers invaded the ship.

***

A middle-aged captain in military uniform waltzed into the *Einhorn*’s cargo hold. A number of medals hung from his chest, although he lacked the gravitas one might have expected of a decorated war hero. His stomach threatened to burst out of the seams of his uniform, and a cigarette jutted out from between his lips, dropping ash everywhere.
“Excuse me, but we maintain a strict no-open-flames policy here,” I warned him gently.
He smiled mockingly. “Why? Are you carrying anything that might ignite? Oil or gunpowder, perhaps? Don’t assume a civilian like yourself knows better than a military man.”
These soldiers claimed they were conducting was a simple inspection, but they were occupying my ship and quibbling about every detail.
Arrogant egotists.
“We apologize for the inconvenience,” the captain’s subordinate said, acting more deferential. “Please try to be patient. We’ll get out of your hair as quickly as possible.”
“Patient?” I scoffed.
As kind as his words were, he was still demanding our obedience. Apparently, respect and consideration were foreign concepts in the republic.
The captain came to a stop in front of Arroganz, and he put his cigarette out on my Armor.
“Hey!” I snapped at him.
“I already told you,” said the subordinate. “We will be finished here shortly.”
This guy was really starting to piss me off. He acted all apologetic, but he was still sneering.
The captain gazed up at Arroganz. “What an unsightly Armor. It has a terrible design. Is this the kind of thing your kingdom is manufacturing nowadays? It must be miserably outdated. I pity you.”
Wow, way to tick off Luxion, I thought. He was typically cool and collected, but he didn’t hesitate to suggest exterminating new humankind, especially when they found a new way to push his buttons. At this rate, I couldn’t guarantee that he wouldn’t lose it and squash the entire Alzer Republic. *I’ll have to talk him down later.*

“Your ship looks impressive from the outside, but the interior is unnoteworthy.” The captain sniffed. “And apparently your crew is so terrified that they won’t show themselves for inspection. Pathetic. But what else ought I expect from a kingdom of cowards?”

These guys were getting on my last nerve, but I couldn’t exactly admit that the ship operated without any crew. So, I bit my tongue and reminded myself that, if I wanted to, I could turn them all to ash. Still, while I did have Luxion the hyper-powerful cheat item in my pocket, I couldn’t go using him willy-nilly. And besides, I was an *adult*. I was perfectly capable of keeping my temper in check.

“What a boring ship.” The captain spun around to leave. “We’re leaving.”

“Yes, sir!” The subordinate paused and looked at me. “Please, don’t mind us. The Alzer Republic warmly extends its welcome to those who come to study on our shores.”

As soon as he’d finished speaking, he chased after his superior.

How utterly transparent.

I lingered behind in the cargo hold, gazing at Arroganz. After the conflict with House Fanoss, both Arroganz and the *Partner* had been destroyed. At least, that was the official story. As far as the kingdom knew, this Armor was a mere replica, and the *Partner* was still being repaired.

“I’ll put this as nicely as I can,” I said. “My first impression of the republic is garbage.”

If this place hadn’t been the setting for the second game, I’d never even have come here.

Luxion looked down at me from the ceiling. “Master, request to open fire.”

“On the inspection ship? Hey, you know I’d love to do that, but we can’t.”

“Just give the word, and I shall sink the entire country for you. That would be more than sufficient.”

“More than sufficient for what? Knock it off. I mean that, okay? I don’t want you destroying any countries.”

See? I knew he’d come up with some kind of murderous scheme.

Meanwhile, my only idea for revenge was to gather some dirt on those two snobs and blackmail them later. “Anyway, this sure is a miserable country.”

“Perhaps they have relied too heavily on the Sacred Tree’s blessings,” said Luxion. “Although they *are* more powerful than the kingdom.”

“Yeah, Marie said the same thing.”

“However, there is something most unnatural about this.”

I shrugged. “There’s not much about this world that *is* natural. I mean, it’s got floating countries and trees bigger than mountains. That’s not normal.”

“Yes, I suppose” Luxion said simply. “I will have to look into it further.”

“Can’t believe the fate of the world hangs on whether or not two people get together. This game is absolutely bonkers.”

I could only pray that my time in the republic would pass smoothly.

***

The port was right at the edge of the continent. One might have been tempted to call it a coastal port, but since the land floated in the air, there weren't exactly any beaches or coastlines. Still, like any harbor, the place bustled with activity.

"How did it take us so long to get here after crossing the border?" I grumbled.

I strolled down the ramp, enjoying the sensation of solid ground for the first time in what felt like forever.

Marie huffed and puffed as she waddled down the gangway behind me, both arms full of luggage. "It was weird traveling through the air and seeing land above *and* below us… Ah, I'm pooped."

We were now on the central continent of the sprawling republic, with its six other regions surrounding us. This area had once been ruled by House Lespinasse, who had produced generations of Holy Priestesses. Now that their house had fallen, the other Six Great Houses populated the country's ruling assembly.

We'd traveled between floating lands and had finally arrived at the capital—home to the academy where we would study.

Kyle and Carla wandered down behind us, luggage in hand.

"Earl Bartfort, you sure haven't brought much with you," said the elf.

"Men never need to bring as much as women," Carla informed him. "Oh, how I envy that."

They both eyed my single bag begrudgingly.

"What?" I asked. "Oh, no, Luxion is carrying most of my luggage. This is just the bare essentials."

Mostly, all I'd brought were daily necessities. But I'd also packed my most prized possession: my tea set. I'd made sure Luxion was extra cautious with that.

Marie set her bags down and rounded on Luxion. "You didn't tell us that you could carry our baggage!"

"You never asked, so I never volunteered the information," he said.

"You're completely insensitive."

"Indeed, you have figured me out," Luxion said bluntly. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Huh? Uh, well…no, I guess not," Marie stammered, taken aback.

Granted, this was Luxion being nice. If Julius had been the one griping, he would have been much more disdainful.

Speaking of Boss Idiot and his four moronic toadies, they all came strolling down to join us with their enormous bags. Yeesh, they'd brought a lot. As soon as they set their first bags down, they returned to the ship to retrieve more.

"Master, a group has come to welcome us," Luxion said.

I turned around to see a number of Holfort Kingdom officials waiting for us, all decked out in suits. These had to be the kingdom's ambassadors to the

republic. Every last one of them looked shocked to see Julius and his companions carting their own luggage down the ramp.

***

The embassy wasn't far from the port. Several other consulates were nearby, and the neighborhood teemed with people from different countries. There was even a diner serving Holfort cuisine.

It really did feel like we had stepped into another country, though the city was more cramped than I'd expected. There was a top-quality French-type restaurant beside a cheap Chinese-style bistro. People of all different nationalities crowded the streets. It was like everything had been shoved together into this small space.

I gazed out the window of our carriage and made conversation with one of the diplomats.

"There sure are a lot of embassies here."

"The Alzer Republic exports magic stones to a number of nations. A great many of them maintain consulates in the capital. Over there you will see the Holy Kingdom of Rachel's embassy, although I recommend you keep your distance."

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel sat smack-dab between Holfort Kingdom and Miss Mylene's small home country. Miss Mylene had married into the Holfort royal family to solidify their alliance and keep Rachel in check.

"You're telling me they give you problems here too?" I asked.

Rachel and Holfort were enemies, so I figured they were probably on bad terms everywhere, but the diplomat just shrugged.

"They can be a hard bunch to stomach, but the true nuisance is the republic itself. How did their garrison treat you?"

"Horribly."

"Naturally. It's because they've never lost a defensive battle. It's gone to their heads. And they make an enormous profit from exporting magic stones, so they enjoy great wealth. So long as you keep your head down, you can make a good living here. It turns me green with envy."

I saw some of the countryside on our way, and he was right. Trees and grass grew in abundance, and their farms were booming. Not only did the republic have an abundance of inorganic resources, they also had rich soil. Any ruler would trip over themselves to gain control of such a territory.

"They've been trying out manufacturing lately as well," said the diplomat. "They're really finding every imaginable way to flex."

"Makes sense. The country with all the resources has all the power."

"I am pleased you grasp the situation, but I would beg you to not start any trouble with them." The diplomat furrowed his brows anxiously. "I truly mean that. Do be careful."

I think he's got the wrong impression. I shook my head. "Please don't phrase it like that. I don't pick fights with everyone I come across."

“Forgive me if I’m reluctant to take you at your word, considering your duels with His Highness.”

“Okay, hold up. Those duels were—”

But before I could explain myself, our carriage pulled up outside my new residence. That was when I realized that the other carriage, the one carrying Marie and the others, was nowhere in sight.

I climbed down and I took in my surroundings. The area had a high-class, urban feel—full of estates with modest gardens. The house in front of me was no less impressive. It had three whole floors, although there wasn’t much distance between it and the neighboring residences.

“*This* is where I’m staying?” I asked.

“Yes. We would ordinarily provide you with a mansion, but we did not have much advance warning of your visit, so we weren’t able to secure one in time.”

A tram clanked and chugged along its rails nearby, and the diplomat rushed to explain it to me. He clearly assumed I’d never seen one before.

“That small vessel travels over land. The republic generally does not permit air travel, so they have their own bizarre form of transportation.”

“Okay, okay. So where are Marie and the others?”

“Prince Julius and his companions are all from prominent noble houses. We prepared the largest residence we had available for them.”

“What, so I’m the odd man out?” If they were all in some kind of mansion, surely they could have found a spare room for me? *Plus, staying in a posh place sounds like fun.*

The diplomat frowned and scratched his cheek. “W-well, Lady Marie and the others are very famous, you understand. We would be in terrible trouble if anything were to happen to them.”

So that was why he was acting so nervous! He must have been worried I’d fallen for Marie’s wiles, like the others. I couldn’t rightly explain why that would never, ever happen, but at least I knew where he was coming from. And besides, I was already engaged. Now that I thought about it, it would look bad if I lived with Marie.

“Okay, I get it. You don’t want me shacking up with the rest of them.”

“I am pleased you understand. Also, I must apologize for this, but I am afraid we haven’t yet been able to procure any servants for you.”

I’d only decided to study abroad at the last moment, so they really hadn’t had time to prepare for my arrival. I couldn’t hold that against them. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I didn’t give you guys much warning. You can give Julius and the others priority.”

“I greatly appreciate that.”

The diplomat informed me that a guide would shortly arrive and give me a tour of the area. After that, he took his leave. Once he was gone, I strolled up to my new house and paused to gaze up at it.

“I wonder if our second protagonist is ensnaring her love interests like she’s supposed to.”

"The way you worded that was absolutely contemptible," Luxion remarked, peeking out of my bag.

I've landed an AI who treats his master like garbage. Just my luck.

***

It was spring break, and the republic's academy was quiet. Each class was broken up by year, and each empty room had enough space for thirty students. If Holfort's academy was like a university, then Alzer's was more like a high school. Since commoners *and* nobles could attend, it had a more welcoming atmosphere.

Some students in school uniforms strolled down the quiet halls. One of them was an ordinary-looking boy named Jean. His parents were peasants, so he didn't have a surname. He was a second-year student with excellent grades, and he was popular with his peers.

Jean smiled, looking troubled. "I know you want me to look out for the exchange students," he told the girl beside him, "but this is too much. They're pretty high-class. Don't you think they'll be ticked off having someone like me take care of them?"

The girl smacked him on the back. Her hair was pulled into a side ponytail, her natural blonde fading into pink at the tips. She had the body of a model, with long arms and legs and a tight stomach. There was a gentle strength in her golden eyes that matched her tomboy nature.

"Come on, don't put yourself down," she said frankly. "You're representing us. Hold your head up! And if they take a high and mighty attitude with you, just sock 'em in the face."

"Uh, you do realize this is a *prince* we're talking about?!"

"That's why you need to have a backbone. Besides, that means they're representing *their* entire country, right? They won't do anything stupid… unlike us."

Jean thought she might be joking, but her expression was entirely sincere. He didn't know what to say to that. "Uh, um…"

"You're a man!" she said, grinning and slapping him on the back again. "Be confident and show a little more oomph!"

Her name was Noelle Beltre and, as far as anyone at the academy knew, she was the daughter of a fallen knight. Noelle stuffed her hands in her pockets. The hallways were normally so raucous. The silence felt quite eerie.

Students from Holfort Kingdom? I just hope they're better than the republic's aristocracy. Noelle didn't exactly have the best impression of them.

"Um, Miss Noelle, you *do* remember that you're supposed to look after them too, right?" Jean said, his forehead crinkling with worry. "Please don't cause a stir like you usually do."

Noelle's eyes widened. "What? Am I really *that* untrustworthy?"

"You're not untrustworthy. You just don't pull your punches when you're dealing with nobility. It's not good to pick fights, you know."

Noelle fiddled with her hair as though she was embarrassed. I know what he means, but really, it's their fault. They're always the ones who start it.

But Jean did seem legitimately concerned. "We have a lot of students with ties to the Six Great Houses this year, and a number of people who have divine protection."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. I'll be good."

Divine protection was granted to those recognized by the Sacred Tree. Because the Six Great Houses possessed this special power, they were able to rule the republic without fear of being ousted. That was also why they allowed the common folk the joys of education. They had no need to fear revolt. Even if the peasants tried to overthrow them, with the tree, the nobles had absolute power.

As Noelle and Jean ambled down the hallway, they ran into a group of girls. Their leader, a third-year girl with purple eyes, stared at Noelle from the center of the group. She was smiling, but her eyes were as cold as ice. Her fluffy, wheat-blonde hair fell to her shoulder blades. She had curves in all the right places, and her breasts were considerably larger than Noelle's. Louise Sara Rault seemed kind and welcoming at first, but the moment she spotted Noelle, her lips curled in a chilly smile. "Oh, dear, I never dreamed I would run into *you* during spring break."

For a moment, Louise's flunkies were too stunned to move, but they soon ducked behind their leader. Louise stood there with her arms folded beneath her breasts.

"I'm only here because a prof asked me to come," Noelle said, keeping her hands in her pockets.

Jean gaped, horrified at how Noelle dared to address this young noblewoman. "Miss Noelle?!"

Louise ignored Jean and pressed a hand over her mouth to hide her mirth. "In trouble again, are we?"

Noelle snorted. "Excuse me? Do you think I'm some kind of delinquent? We've got foreign students coming to study here, and the prof asked me to show them around. So, do me a favor? Whenever you see me in the halls from now on, just ignore me."

Louise Sara Rault was the oldest daughter of the Rault family, one of the Six Great Houses—the same family who had deposed House Lespinasse. After that, the Raults had taken over chairing the assembly. That practically made Louise a princess, and to make matters worse, her house took issue with Noelle's family.

As Noelle and Jean turned to leave, Louise stepped in their way. She pressed her face close to Noelle's, grabbing the other girl by her ponytail. "You truly do infuriate me."

There was nothing Jean could do. Louise and her entourage had ties to the most prominent nobles in the republic. But Noelle didn't seem to care. She slapped Louise's hand away without hesitation.
"Enough. You may be older than me, but don't let it go to your head."
Louise retreated a few steps and shrugged. "Oh, I'm quaking in my shoes. Although, I would say that *you're* the one who is too full of herself."
She turned to leave, and her toadies followed close behind. The suffocating atmosphere finally started to ease.
When they were gone, Jean sucked down a breath. "I *literally* just told you not to pick fights," he said, tears beading in his eyes. "And you have to go piss off the princess of all people."
Noelle scratched her head. "My bad. I'll try to be more careful next time."
"I'll pray there *is* no next time," Jean said, although he didn't look too hopeful.
As they walked together, Noelle shot him a grin, trying to chase off the awkwardness. "Hey, more importantly—"
But before she could finish her sentence, a second-year boy strode toward them. He had the same golden eyes as Noelle, but his hair was dark red and spiky. He was handsome, but his eyes were narrowed in a permanent glare.
"Just when did the two of you get so chummy?" he asked angrily.
He might have been tall and toned, but his otherwise charming face was contorted in a jealous scowl.
"Uh, um, you see…" stuttered Jean.
Noelle cut him off. "Prof asked us to look after the exchange students. We just left the staff room for orientation, and we're on our way home."
That did nothing to soften the boy's anger. "How can I be sure you're not pulling my leg?"
His skepticism infuriated Noelle. "What right do you have to grill me about this? Come on, Jean, we're leaving."
"M-Miss Noelle?! B-but, he's—"
"Ask me if I care!"
"Noelle!" the boy bellowed after them as they left. "I haven't given up! You're my woman, you hear?!"
"That's not for you to decide!"
His name was Loic Leta Barielle, and he was heir to House Barielle.
Noelle peered back at Loic and poked her tongue out. "Moron, get over yourself."
Jean covered his face with both hands in despair.

Chapter 2:
The Academy

IT WAS THE START of a new trimester at the academy. I woke up early and sat on the side of my bed to chat with Luxion. “So, what’s the word?”

Luxion had been gathering information since our arrival in the republic. Our first order of business was to find the sequel’s protagonist.

Fortunately, we had already identified one of the love interests: Loic Leta Barielle, a boy with distinct red hair. According to Marie, all the love interests from the second game had strong, defining quirks. I thought the same could be said of Julius and the others. If these guys were even more over the top, then I was already terrified.

Loic was the heir to House Barielle, and the protagonist had an easy time cozying up to him. Of all the possible options, his route seemed the most likely.

“Why don’t you wash your face before I give my report?” Luxion asked.

I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. “I’m too curious about what you found. Hurry up and spit it out.”

“You leave me with no choice. Very well, to summarize: I still haven’t identified her.”

“What?” I asked, exasperated.

“Today is the first day of term. Spring break isn’t exactly the best time to investigate relationships at the academy. Also, we have a small problem.”

“What kind of problem?” I asked, slipping my hand under my shirt to scratch my chest.

“I followed Marie’s information and searched for a student with the last name Beltre. There are ten at the academy.”

I hadn’t expected that. “So what? If you’ve gotten that far, surely you can figure out who she is, right? You just have to search for someone with twintails and a candid personality.”

“And therein lies the issue. I didn’t find one girl, I found two. Twins, to be precise. That doesn’t exactly line up with what Marie told us. I have been unable to identify which of them is the protagonist. You and Marie will have to confirm it for yourselves.”

“Come again…?” I frowned. I didn’t hear anything about the protagonist having a twin sister.

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Meanwhile, a ruckus was breaking out at the mansion where Marie and her entourage were staying.

The diplomats had prepared an impressive residence for His Highness—a colossal mansion with an expansive garden. Even the foyer was massive.

For Marie, it was like stepping into a dream. However, reality wasn't so kind. They might have been given a huge estate, but they lacked the staff to properly manage it.
"Didn't I tell you guys yesterday? I'm pretty sure I did! 'Tomorrow is the start of our new trimester, so make sure you prepare beforehand.' That's what I said, right?!"
Julius and the others dashed about in a panic, fishing their uniforms out of their luggage.
As Marie chastised them, Julius tilted his head in confusion. "I took your words to heart, but no one prepared my uniform for me."
Jilk nodded. "Why didn't the help hang them out for us?"
Marie cradled her head. "We don't *have* any 'help' here! Not a single person. Isn't it obvious that you'd have to prepare by yourselves?!"
"We've got Kyle, right?" Greg said, taking his shirt out and pulling it over his head.
The elf he spoke of was dripping in sweat. While the five men slacked off, he and Carla were rushing around, trying to get things ready.
"Are you a complete moron?" Kyle grumbled as he ironed a shirt. "I had to prepare a meal for eight people, and you expect me to do everything else too?"
A vein bulged on Greg's forehead. "What's with the attitude?!"
"It's too early to get angry," Brad said, checking the hem of his pants. "More importantly, these are too long. Carla, be a dear and fix them for me."
Tears welled in Carla's eyes as she rushed to tailor all the boys' uniforms. "Please just put up with it for today."
"I am afraid I cannot do that. You see, I am quite finicky about the length of my pants. Fix them immediately."
Carla glanced between the mountain of uniforms and the clock. Then she turned to Marie. "My lady," she sobbed. "There's no way I'll make it in time."
Marie smacked Brad over the head. "You heard her. We're not going to make it! Shut it and make do!"
Sadly, that was hardly the end of their problems.
Chris was already wearing his uniform. With nothing better to do, he grabbed a wooden sword. "I'll go practice for a bit."
Marie stepped in front of him. "No! You'll just get sweaty! Be patient. We're leaving in a few!"
It was barely even dawn and already their mansion had descended into chaos.
Ever since we came here, I haven't had a moment of rest, Marie thought dolefully.
They wouldn't even have been in this predicament if not for the queen. Her Majesty had purposefully reduced their staff, leaving them to struggle through their trip without help. In fact, it was the whole point of this

journey. So now, on top of worrying about her own studies, Marie had to manage their daily life as well. Normally, she would have coordinated with the others beforehand to better ensure their independence, but there simply wasn't time.
"By the way," Julius asked innocently. "Are we going to make the opening ceremony in time?" He stared up at the clock and did absolutely nothing to speed them along.
You jerks! Help out a little, would you?!
Marie screamed, and her voice carried all the way through the mansion.

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I shifted in my seat in the academy's reception room and checked my pocket watch. Everything in the republic was so unnecessarily extravagant, including the furnishings. Just how rich was this country?
It was time to leave, but Marie and the others still hadn't shown up. I'd even waited an extra ten minutes, until the professor who had come to entertain me had to leave.
"They have some nerve being late on their first day," I scoffed.
Luxion blended into the background with his cloaking device. Now that the coast was clear, he used a projection to relay information to me. He had planted drones all over the school, and one of the feeds showed Marie and the others rushing toward the building.
"It seems they neglected to prepare last night," Luxion remarked.
"Too bad. I wanted to talk to them before school."
I still had close to no information about this sequel. Luxion had gathered some intel, but I had no idea how much of it was accurate.
"Guess we still don't know which twin is the real protagonist."
"According to Marie, she should have twintails. However, each twin has their hair in a side ponytail."
"As if it wasn't bad enough that there are two of them, now their hair doesn't match the description? How the hell are we meant to tell them apart? Surely at least one of them has the twintails Marie told us about."
It seemed as though our twintailed protagonist had transformed into ponytailed twins. It didn't help that they were identical. According to Luxion's investigation, the only difference was their personalities. Noelle was energetic, lively, and active, while Lelia was a fairly average girl. Oh, and apparently their hair was differently colored.
And their breasts. Noelle's look bigger. Maybe a C-cup? I nodded. "Yup. Guess we'll be telling them apart by hair and chest size."
"That is quite possibly the most reprehensible way to distinguish between them."
"Is pink her natural color? This world sure has some crazy stuff."
"I notice you ignored my comment."

We bantered back and forth for a bit, then Luxion suddenly went silent. His feed cut off too. Someone was approaching.
I straightened my back and readjusted myself in my seat as the professor returned to the room with a male and female student in tow.
“Sorry to keep you waiting. The remaining exchange students have arrived, so we’ll guide you to your classes. These two will be showing you around.”
The boy looked rather plain, but he seemed kind. “I’m Jean. If there’s anything you’re unsure about, please feel free to ask.”
The girl was another matter. “Nice to meetcha.”
They spoke the Holfort Kingdom’s language fluently. The boy sounded more formal while the girl used slang. More importantly, the girl was Noelle Beltre—one of the game’s potential protagonists. She stood in front of me and grinned while I stared at them wide-eyed. The two exchanged troubled looks.
“D-did I sound unnatural or something?” Noelle asked.
Jean shook his head. “I think you sounded fine.”
I waved my hand dismissively. “Nah, you both sounded so natural that it just took me by surprise is all. Name’s Leon, by the way.”
As we exchanged obligatory greetings, I couldn’t shake my shock. Who would have guessed that I’d meet the game’s possible protagonist by chance?!

***

We didn’t attend the opening ceremony. Or rather, we couldn’t, because we didn’t make it in time. There were some basic introductions in class, but it was still a bit of a sad start to the new term. And because our group was split up, there was never more than two of us in any given class.
The more time I spent in this place, the more it reminded me of my old world. The classrooms were set up exactly as I remembered in Japan—from elementary all the way up to high school.
The devs probably used Japanese schools as a model for this place, so I guess it isn’t surprising.
Even the desks and the chairs were exactly as I remembered. Some of the minute details were different, but the uniform definitely made me feel like I’d traveled back in time. That made it all the more strange to see students with vividly colored hair—from red to blue and every shade between.
Nostalgia mixed with discomfort. Some things felt so out of place that it was jarring. I stared into space, feeling dazed.
In front of me, Noelle twisted around. “Hey, is it true you’re already a knight?”
Seemed she was curious about me. She wasn’t exactly ladylike, but she was lively and expressed her interest without hesitation. It made her seem almost restless.

"It's true." My reply was a bit curt, but it wasn't because I disliked her. I simply wasn't accustomed to speaking Alzerian yet. Plus, if this girl really *was* the protagonist of the second story, I couldn't risk getting too close to her.
According to Marie, there was a point in the game where foreign students from the kingdom came to study. Assuming you had your save data from the first game, one of the original characters would make a cameo, but *only* one. At present, all *five* idiots had come, along with Marie and her little entourage.
"You really are incredible, Bartfort. And I hear you're the heir to an earldom?"
Yeah, it made sense that she assumed that was the case. Anything else at my age was pretty unheard of. "Nope. I'm straight-up an earl. Bit of an upstart, I guess."
"Wait, so you became an earl purely through acts of merit? At our age? The kingdom sure is incredible."
Honestly, Noelle wasn't that interested in me. More than anything, I think she felt bad. The reason for her pity? Well.
"Lord Brad, please, tell us more!"
"Aw, no fair. Give me a chance to talk to him!"
"Um, what kind of girl is your type?"
Flattered by the girls' attention, Brad responded happily. Yup, total narcissist. He basked in the flood of compliments, as was his wont.
"My type, hm? I like quiet, petite girls that stir my protective instincts. In fact, I already have a fiancée. Sorry, but I won't be able to return your affections."
The girls let out shrill cries.
"What? Lord Brad has a fiancée? And he's so faithful! How wonderful!"
Most of the girls in our class had flocked around him. Admittedly, he was quite good-looking, so long as he didn't open his mouth. Still, it was like some celebrity had dropped by.
Noelle glanced at me and flashed a troubled smile.
Meanwhile, the boys shot jealous glares at Brad, and none of them bothered to strike up a conversation with me. I was so plain and forgettable that I faded into our surroundings. I might as well have been a background character.
"Uh, sorry they're being like this," said Noelle. "They're all a bit excited."
"You don't have to worry about me. It was the same at Holfort Academy."
Although the discrepancy really didn't bother me, Noelle went out of her way to talk to me anyway. She seemed rather headstrong, but she was kind. Maybe that wasn't surprising, since we suspected she was the protagonist.
Hm, maybe I should try to collect some info.
"By the way, do you have any siblings?" I asked her.
"I do. A twin, in fact. My little sister," Noelle said eagerly. "She's *way* more ladylike than me and lets everything roll off her back. Plus, she's smart and

super reliable. But, much as I hate to break it to you, she already has a boyfriend. So don't go hitting on her, okay?"

"Oh, yeah? What a shame. How about you, Miss Noelle?"

I nearly slipped and blurted out, *Don't worry, I'm already engaged to two sexy ladies with great personalities.* Fortunately, I managed to swallow it back. It was a bit tricky to go around confessing that I had *two* fiancées. People would probably judge me for it, so I figured it was best to keep it to myself.

"You can drop the whole 'Miss' thing," said Noelle. "I'm single at the moment. I'm not the most well mannered, as you can probably tell. And besides, guys don't usually bother with me. A certain *someone* always butts in when they try. But I'm open to applications if there are any good guys out there looking for a partner."

She was fun to talk to, but what really bothered me was this "certain someone" who always butted in, and how she was "single at the moment." Her little sister was already dating someone, but I still had no idea whether she was the protagonist—or if Noelle was. Although, at this point, the younger sister seemed more likely.

"Who did you mean when you said a 'certain someone'?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"I doubt you would understand, Bartfort, even if I explained it. But I'm talking about the princess of the Rault family. She's a real nuisance, and she likes to pick on me."

Oh, boy, House Rault was the final boss of this game, and their princess was messing with Noelle?

"You can just call me Leon, you know."

I was so focused on trying to figure out this protagonist riddle that the high-pitched squees around Brad's desk didn't even register.

***

The sun didn't reach behind the academy's main building. It was dark there, and the air was frigid. It was also deserted, which made it the perfect meet-up spot. After school, I summoned Marie there so we could work out which twin was the real protagonist. Alas, Marie was tired and dived into complaining before I could even get started.

"I told them, you know. 'Get everything ready the day before.' So why does all the blame fall to me? Why am *I* the bad guy? I haven't done anything wrong!"

There hadn't been much on the schedule today: just the entrance ceremony for the first years and the opening ceremony for the first day of the trimester. It was only just past noon, and the sun was still high.

One of the things that struck me as different from the Holfort Academy was the lack of student dormitories. Because of that, the crowds around campus thinned as soon as school let out.

“Enough of your whining,” I snapped. “Tell me which of these girls is the protagonist.”
“I already told you what I know.”
“Just look at this, okay?”
Marie peered at Luxion’s feed. Her eyes went wide, and she cradled her head in her hands. “Why the hell are there twins?! This wasn’t in the game!”
“Like I told you: We’re in trouble. One of them *has* to be the protagonist. Given what you said about her personality, Noelle seems like the best fit, but Lelia’s the one with a boyfriend.”
I had extracted some information from Noelle, but it wasn’t enough to be sure.
Marie glanced between their pictures, deep in thought. “I never dreamed her hair would change. It’s hard to tell. The protagonist didn’t get many face shots in the game. Oh, hold on! There was a CG of her in a dress where she had her hair pulled to one side.”
“Since reality is already different from the game,” said Luxion, “and this ‘protagonist’ has changed her hair, it’s possible there are a number of other differences as well.”
Maybe the hairstyle was entirely insignificant. Either way, I just wanted to find the protagonist quickly so I could make sure she got together with a love interest. I never dreamed we’d encounter an issue like this, let alone so soon after we’d arrived.
“Lelia has a boyfriend. Is it weird for her to be dating someone this early in the game?”
I hadn’t played the sequel, so I didn’t know how quickly things moved.
Marie cupped her chin thoughtfully. “They get together around the middle of their second year, but once they get close, the other students start gossiping about their relationship, or something like that… Oh, wait. Maybe that’s a different game.”
She frowned as she combed her vague memory. “I’m pretty sure there’s some fuss about a duel, and the guy who stands up for the protagonist becomes her lover. If there are several guys who step in, she gets to pick which one she wants. I think.”
“Great. A duel again?” The original game had one too. Maybe girls enjoyed seeing guys fight for them?
“Do you have any pictures of Lelia’s boyfriend?” Marie asked.
Luxion played back a video he’d taken. “This is what I captured thirty minutes ago.”
The girl on the feed greatly resembled Noelle.
That has to be Lelia.
Her hair was completely straight and a dark shade of pink. She looked as headstrong as her sister, but somehow she seemed even more unruly. The other person was a boy with blue hair that fell freely down to his shoulders. He had green eyes, was a bit shorter than most boys our age, and was so

thin that I was sure he didn’t have any muscle. Still, he had a gentle air about him.
“That’s Emile!” Marie blurted. “Easy-Pick Emile!”
“What’s with the creepy nickname?”
Apparently, his full name was Emile Laz Pleven. He was the second son of the Pleven family, one of the Six Great Houses. Emile was also one of the potential love interests. According to Marie, in the fandom, he had the unfortunate (and cruel) nickname of Easy-Pick.
“It’s because his route is so easy,” Marie explained. “Even if you screw up and can’t get any of the other guys, you can still clear the game if you pick Emile midway through.”
I stared at the feed, listening in on their conversation.
“Lelia, um, w-would you like to go on a date next weekend?” Emile’s cheeks flushed. It was pretty innocent and endearing, but Lelia acted like she was used to this kind of attention.
“Sure, but don’t even think about taking me to an art museum. I want to go shopping.”
“N-no art museums? Really?”
“We went to one last time *and* the time before that. Let’s go somewhere else for once, okay?”
“Y-yeah. I guess you have a point.”
Marie listened eagerly, drawn in by their exchange.
“It’s kinda embarrassing watching them like this,” I said. “Do you think Lelia is our protagonist?”
Marie nodded solemnly. “It looks like it. I feel like I’ve seen this dialogue before. And Emile *is* one of her love interests. It seems a bit early for them to be so close, but they did have the same kind of chemistry in the game.”
Marie didn’t remember the specifics, but she confirmed that she was now certain.
Luxion shut off the feed. “In that case, shall we assume Lelia is the protagonist?”
Marie folded her arms. “I was sure she’d go after Classic-Boy Loic. It’s kind of surprising she would end up with Emile.”
Classic-Boy Loic, huh? I shrugged. “Personally, I’m surprised that she’s such a normal girl. From a personality point of view, Noelle seems more like the protagonist type.”
They might have been twins, but they were super different as people.
“Really?” said Marie. “But Lelia is dating Emile. She *has* to be the protagonist. If only the villainess would show up and start bullying her, then we’d know for sure.”
Villainess? So, there was a rival in the sequel, just like Angie in the first game? “The sequel has one too, huh?”
“They aren’t simply duking it out for love. This villainess is the daughter of House Rault, which is politically opposed to the protagonist’s house. She’s a year older, but she’s constantly going after our girl.”

“Hey, hold up a second.”
“What?”
I thought back to my conversation with Noelle. “I think Noelle is being bullied by her.”
And she’d never said anything about her little sister being a victim too.
Marie’s face scrunched up, and she clapped her hands over her head. “Ugh! I don’t even know anymore!”
What was going on with this game?
Luxion bobbed thoughtfully. “Based on the information we have, I would conclude that the protagonist’s power comes from her Priestess bloodline. If that is true, then either of these girls could be the one we’re looking for.”
“Th-that’s right!” Marie lifted her chin. “In the game, she was the only surviving member of the Lespinasse family *and* she had Priestess blood. Since both girls fit that description, either one of them could be the protagonist!”
“Since they’re twins, maybe they each inherited a role from the original?” I suggested. “So, one has a boyfriend, while the other is being targeted by the villainess.”
“I can’t say one way or the other,” said Marie.
We were no closer now than before, but I supposed things could have been worse.
“Either way, we need to investigate them both.”
“Indeed,” said Luxion. “I shall continue gathering what intel I can.”
We were no closer to identifying our main girl, but the situation wasn’t hopeless yet.

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School had ended, but the girls still clamored around Brad as he walked down the halls.
“Lord Brad, this building has special classrooms in it.”
“It even has a music room.”
“There’s also a kitchen for home economics, where the girls make sweets. Speaking of, please eat some of the cookies I made!”
A handful of girls had volunteered to show him around, and Brad didn’t seem all that bothered by their affections.
“I appreciate you ladies helping me out.”
He shot them a smile, and their cheeks lit up.
Meanwhile, a group of male students sat on some nearby stairs and watched the scene unfold. They were a shady-looking bunch, uniforms hanging loose and unbuttoned. Their leader had a vein popping on his forehead. He had short, wavy purple hair and matching eyes. Brad’s hair was the same shade, and it infuriated this guy to see the girls fussing over him. However, hair color aside, he lacked Brad’s dashing good looks. He

was slender, his skin was an unhealthy color, and there was a half-finished bottle of alcohol on the stairs beside him.
His name was Pierre Io Feivel, and he was the second son of the Feivel family, another of the Six Great Houses. He wasn't the heir, but he still had enough status to earn his own group of flunkies. They all had crests on the back of their right hand—not tattoos or scars, but proof of the Sacred Tree's protection. Of all of them, Pierre's crest was the most unique. Only members of the Six Great Houses were blessed with it. To the Alzerians, a crest was a mark of nobility.
"Why are they squawking over some third-rate noble?" Pierre snapped. Right away, his panicked lackeys tried to placate him.
"They're too lowly for you to concern yourself with."
"Agreed. Besides, those girls are all peasant-born. That's the best those Holfort nobles could hope for."
"Yeah, they aren't at the same level as you, Lord Pierre."
As they laid on the compliments, Pierre snatched up the bottle and threw his head back, draining it dry. When some liquid spilled out, he wiped it away with his sleeve. "Time to have some fun. It's been a while," he said, grinning wryly.
"We gonna mess with those same guys as last time?"
"That's not a bad idea, but it'll be more fun to torment those guys from Holfort. If we rile them up enough, maybe we even start a war. Then I can make a name for myself in battle."
Pierre didn't seem to care about the bloodshed that would cause, and he wasn't the only one.
"Sounds good to me. If that happens, I wanna to go into battle with you."
"Me too! I'd love to earn some medals."
"Count me in!"
They all grinned at each other. None of them seemed concerned by the thought of war. If anything, they wanted it. The crests on their hands made them confident of their victory.
Pierre glanced down at his own hand. "Yeah, let's enjoy ourselves. We'll start with…ah yes, the ones looking after the exchange students." He grinned. "Let's take our time. Make them suffer. It'll be entertaining to see how far we can push them before they lose it."
Thus, Pierre focused his attention on the new students.

***

Lelia and Noelle lived in an ordinary apartment. It wasn't too far from the campus, and it was clean and spacious enough for them to live in relative comfort. Former retainers of House Lespinasse had prepared the place for them, and they continued to look after the girls in secret, even now.
At the moment, Noelle was wearing an apron and cooking a meal. Around her, the kitchen was orderly with white walls and appliances. Noelle

hummed to herself as she worked until Lelia slipped in through the front door.
“I’m home,” she said without much emotion.
“Glad you’re back!” Noelle replied cheerfully. “Dinner will be done shortly.”
“Okay.”
Noelle was used to her sister’s curtness, but the exhaustion on Lelia’s face worried her.
“Did something happen?”
Lelia paused for a moment. “Hey, you were selected to look after the exchange students, right?”
“Yeah, because you refused.”
Noelle quirked a brow, wondering why Lelia was bringing this up. Her sister’s expression was unreadable and a little discomforting. Noelle turned the burner off and planted her hands on her hips.
“Did you notice anything weird about them?” Lelia asked.
“Weird? I suppose a little, but they seem to be pretty popular with the other students. I’m sure you’ve heard about what a stir they caused with the girls, right?”
“I have. What bothers me is that boy. The plain one. And the two girls.”
Was she talking about Leon?
“Oh, him? Come to think of it, he *was* pretty interested in you. He looked disappointed when I told him you were taken.” Noelle chuckled, but Lelia didn’t even crack a smile. Why was her sister acting so strangely? “What’s really bothering you?”
“Nothing,” Lelia said, and she wandered off to her room before Noelle could ask anything else.

Chapter 3: Twins

IT WAS THE START of a new trimester at Holfort Academy, and Angie found herself with no shortage of things to do. Ever since the battle with the dukedom, the number of students in her year had dwindled. The crown had stripped many nobles of their titles, either because they were traitors or because they were opportunists who had hung back and failed to help their allies in battle. On top of that, the academy had officially banned all personal servants—which only left the school more deserted than ever. As such, Angie's life was even busier.

Today, she was in the room where Leon had once held his tea parties. Across from her was Clarice, an upperclassman Angie had been consulting with about issues at the academy.

"You're saying that female students feel disenfranchised?"

"That's right," said Clarice. "Before, they all had personal servants who would wake them in the morning and help them prepare for the day. Since the school has put an end to that, many of them are late for class. They can't even get themselves ready."

Angie closed her eyes for a moment, exasperated. "The palace wishes to give the girls a harsh dose of reality. If it bothers them so much, they are free to drop out."

"It's not that simple." Clarice traced a finger around the rim of her cup. "It's strange being in here, isn't it? Sure brings back fond memories of teatime with Leon."

Angie narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

Clarice shrugged. "Oh, I'll leave that answer up to your imagination. Have you received any letters from him?"

Angie's cheeks colored. "Y-yes. They come every few days. It seems like he's working hard at his new school."

"So, he's committed enough to write, hm?" Clarice raised her eyebrows, then changed the topic. "Angelica, while the girls present their own problem, there are issues with the boys as well."

"What? Them too?"

"They're having trouble adjusting. The girls aren't acting the same anymore. Many of the boys are struggling to cope with the change."

Although they were treated better than before, many of the boys still had qualms. Angie needed to investigate further.

"What are you talking about? I haven't heard anything about this."

"That's because you're engaged to Leon. He's popular with some of the male students, and they don't want to cause you any trouble."

Leon had saved the boys from their irrationally cruel circumstances—especially those from the poor border territories. As much the boys

complained about him, they considered him their benefactor, and they weren't the only ones who held Leon in high esteem. Even some men outside the academy favored him.

"They're like fanboys. Some of them even think of him romantically."

Angie frowned. "I am glad they're so receptive to him, but Leon isn't interested in other men."

Clarice grinned. "That's good news for me."

Angie shot her a sharp look. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Good question. I'll leave that one to your imagination too."

How many times had they repeated this exchange? Angie sensed Clarice hadn't yet abandoned her feelings for Leon, but she kept dodging the subject.

Angie stared down at the contents of her cup and pushed aside the other girl's teasing. All of these changes have caused dissatisfaction across the academy. This is going to be a problem.

She sipped her drink and found herself longing for the flavor of Leon's tea, just as Clarice did.

Suddenly, Clarice's eyes turned serious. "Now that we have more scholarship students, we have other problems as well. You should warn Miss Olivia."

"What's the issue?"

The academy had once been a place for the aristocracy to receive an education. Only the most exceptional commoners had been able to attend—such as those from rich merchant families, or adventurers who had distinguished themselves. It was natural that the change in admission policy would cause a commotion.

"Many of the nobles are going out of their way to pick fights with the scholarship students," Clarice explained.

The war with the Principality of Fanoss had only just ended, and life at the academy had changed so fast. It was bound to cause issues, and everyone had to find their own way to deal with it.

Angie sighed. This really is a nuisance. I hope things calm down before Leon returns.

***

My days at the Alzer Academy were markedly different from what I'd experienced in Holfort. It really did remind me of school back in Japan.

As the teacher lectured on in the background, Luxion transmitted reports to me. "Master, I have identified all of the love interests, save for two."

I tapped my pen against my notebook, signaling him to continue. To anyone else, I looked like a dedicated student.

"According to Marie, there is a hidden love interest outside of the academy, but I am still looking into him. The other one that I have yet to identify does attend this institution. He is the heir to House Rault."

Apparently, the son of the final boss was a love interest. That gave him a complex relationship with the protagonist, but apparently that was okay because he was actually adopted or something. I didn't really know the specifics. However, Rault did have a biological daughter, and she happened to be the villainess.
Whatever the case, this guy is heir to the antagonist's family. Yet he's still somehow a love interest? That sure puts him in a rough spot. I feel kinda bad for the guy. If he hooked up with the protagonist, that would make his adoptive family his enemies.
"There's also a bit of unpleasant news," said Luxion.
That sounded foreboding. I didn't really want to know any more, but I couldn't very well ignore it. Before I had a chance to inquire, our professor turned his attention my way.
"I just want to make sure you boys are following along okay. There's nothing you're having trouble with, is there?"
Clement was a good teacher, trying to look out for Brad and me.
"I'm fine."
"Y-yeah, no problem here, sir."
Although I appreciated his consideration and gentle demeanor…
Clement winked at us. "Oh, yeah? Well, if you boys have any trouble at all, you be sure to let me know, 'kay?"
As bad as it felt to admit it, the whole interaction sent shivers down my spine.
Clement was a man, albeit one who talked in a hyper-feminine way—like one of those effeminate male anime characters. But Clement wasn't just a regular man. He was *ripped.* He had a shirt stretched tight over his bulging pecs, and the cleft in his chin was covered with a thick five o'clock shadow—even though he'd obviously shaved it this morning.
The bell sounded, and Professor Clement shut his textbook.
"That's all for today. Make sure you all study, 'kay? And don't forget to prepare before our next lesson. Bad boys and girls who fail to do so will be punished."
He blew a kiss at us, and all the boys in the class wailed in dismay.
Clement was also our homeroom teacher, and he was great at his job. But yeah, his whole bodybuilder show-off aesthetic definitely threw me off.

***

Once class was over, Noelle spun around to face me. She sat backward in her chair, resting her arms on the backrest as she peered down at my notebook.
She was wearing a skirt, so sitting with her legs wide open like that seemed a bit…unladylike. Her underwear wasn't visible, but her uniform was still riding up.
"The notes you took are even better than mine," she said.

She’d offered to tutor me before things started, but Luxion had already helped me consolidate all the information we’d learned in class.



“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s good to know I can come to you if there’s anything I don’t understand.”

She was a big help when it came to Alzerian vocabulary I didn’t know, or times when the teacher spoke so fast that I couldn’t make out what he was saying.

My reassurance restored her confidence. “In that case, guess I’m doing my job!”

I glanced over at Brad. He was still surrounded by girls, and it didn’t seem like he needed any help from Noelle either. But then, he was a spoiled noble, so his linguistic abilities were certainly better than mine. He probably knew a whole bunch of other languages too. It was sad to think that someone so talented had been so thoroughly deceived by Marie.

“Hey,” said Noelle, interrupting my thoughts. “I have to give Marie and Carla a tour of the area today. You wanna tag along?”

Noelle was supposed to look after the girls, so really, she should have been in the same class as them. But since we’d decided to come here at the last minute, the academy hadn’t had time to set everything up either—hence why Noelle was in our class instead of Jean.

“I’ll pass,” I said. “Jean is supposed to show me around today.”

“Aw, what a bummer.”

Noelle voiced her feelings without reserve. She really was just as energetic and candid as Marie described. It certainly made her easy to get along with.

“I was hoping you’d carry our stuff home for us,” she said.

It also meant she could be pretty blunt.

“I see you’re not hiding your ulterior motive,” I said.

“What, did you think I was inviting you on a date? I’ve got bad news for you: I’m not that easy.”

I’d pegged her as just the type to go on casual dates, but it seemed I was mistaken. Maybe she kept her walls up. Frankly, I would’ve been more at ease if she *were* the type to accept casual dates. Especially if that meant getting her a boyfriend.

“You’re so cute that I figured you were already dating someone,” I said. “Aren’t there any guys you’re close with?”

Her expression clouded over. “Only Jean. Our houses aren’t far from one another, and we talk quite a bit.”

Jean? The male guide for the exchange students? I was pretty sure he wasn’t a love interest. *All she said was that they’re close. Guess they’re not dating?*

“I do *want* a boyfriend,” said Noelle. “But there’s a big obstacle in my way.”

“Obstacle? You mean the princess of House Rault you mentioned?”

“Yep. And there’s one more. A prince.”

A prince, huh?

Something I’d learned since coming here was that each of the Six Great Houses ruled their territory like royalty. The house leaders (or kings, as they saw themselves) were united by the Sacred Tree, providing the

foundations of the Alzer Republic as we knew it. Unlike in Holfort, that meant each house had a different middle name. Honestly? It seemed like a bothersome setup.
“His name is Loic,” said Noelle. “He’s got some strange ideas about me, and I don’t really care for him. He keeps telling everyone he’s my boyfriend, but I refuse to acknowledge it.” She paused for a moment. “Actually, he was a pretty okay guy before all this started.”
She looked depressed, and I was starting to sweat bullets.
Loic? Uh, wasn’t he supposed to be the canon love interest? And Noelle hates him?
“He’s claiming to be your boyfriend?” I repeated, hoping for clarification.
“Don’t take him seriously,” she said. “He’s full of crap.”

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It was lunch hour, so I got some flavored bread from the cafeteria and munched on it as I went to meet Marie in a quiet part of the school. I needed to tell her of what I’d learned. We were both flummoxed by the revelation.
“So Noelle likes Jean, and even though Loic is trying to cozy up to her, she’s not interested?” Marie crouched down, put her head in her hands, and groaned.
“Yup, that’s what it looks like. She and Jean live close to each other and talk about all kinds of stuff. She even splits leftovers with him when she makes too much for dinner. That’s how close they are.”
Man, that makes me jealous. If this were a light novel, Jean would be the protagonist right now.
Instead, he was a background character in an otome game. Having the protagonist fall in love with him was like having the most drop-dead gorgeous girl in the world fall for Mr. Average. Despite her playgirl appearance, Noelle was all-around wholesome. She might have been kind of crude and unladylike compared to the girls back home, but all the other girls here were normal. The fact that this whole place reminded me of my own school experience only made the girls here more appealing. If the republic weren’t so tyrannical, this place would have been perfect.
Meanwhile, Marie was at her wit’s end. “All right, Lelia has hooked up with Easy-Pick, and Noelle is being pursued by Loic. But the villainess is tormenting Noelle, and…” Her eyes spun, and she raked her fingers through her hair. “Can someone please explain how the hell we’re supposed to figure this out?!”
I tore into my second packet of flavored bread, and Luxion floated up beside me, having returned from his latest information-gathering mission.
“It does seem like the rest of the students see Lelia and Emile as a couple,” he said.

“He’s the second born of one of the Six Great Houses, right? Should he really be dating a commoner?”
Luxion’s red and eye-like lens shifted. “It is most likely seen as youthful indiscretion. They may suspect he will grow out of it. Or perhaps they consider her a mere lover, not a potential wife?”
“In the game, everyone takes it seriously,” said Marie. “Once the protagonist is chosen as the Sacred Sapling’s Priestess, they can date officially. They get their own happy end, wedding and all.”
“So basically, she’s the Alzerian version of Holfort’s Saint, huh?”
With the protagonist in the first game, once Olivia became the Saint, society had to accept whoever she chose to love—be it the heir of a great house or even Prince Julius himself. It sounded like the sequel’s protagonist got similar treatment once she became the Priestess.
“Master, I suspect that as long as Noelle establishes a relationship with one of the love interests, there should be no further issues.”
“Yeah, the only problem is Noelle *isn’t* interested in Loic. Are the other love interests still possible candidates?”
Marie counted them off on her fingers. “There’s Classic-Boy Loic, Easy-Pick Emile, Rotten-Professor Narcisse, Brother-Obsessed Hugues, and the secret character, Big Brother Fernand. Oh, and then there’s also Archnemesis Serge.”
Each of them was from one of the Six Great Houses.
More importantly, are those nicknames really necessary?
“What’s with the ‘Big Brother’ bit anyway?”
“Fernand is Hugues’s older brother. He’s still young, but he’s the head of House Druille. He even attends the assemblies of the Six Great Houses.”
Luxion bobbed up and down in a nod. “A person of influence, I see. I currently lack the manpower to gather further information on this Fernand.”
“So, when does the protagonist meet up with this secret character or whatever?”
“She has to get close to Hugues first,” said Marie. “He’s young, has a strong sense of justice, *and* he’s super hot! I’d rather have him than the guys I’m stuck with right now.”
As exasperating as her little confession was, we needed to sort out who Noelle should hook up with.
“I guess the best options would be Narcisse or Hugues, right? Fernand doesn’t seem like a bad choice either, but we don’t have enough information on him.”
Serge wasn’t attending the academy, and Noelle had already expressed her contempt for Loic, so those two were out of the question.
Marie pulled a face. “Pairing her off with a teacher in a game is one thing, but in real life? If seems kinda iffy. If you want to play cupid, I guess Hugues would be the safest pick. But he’s a third-year and has a kinda difficult personality. Hmm… Ah!”

“What is it?”
Marie’s face lit up. She must have remembered something. “Oh, it’s just…um…well, in the game, if you don’t trigger a certain event with Hugues in the first school year, then it’s too late.”
“What do you mean by ‘too late’?”
“If you don’t get close to him as a first year, then you can’t go down that route. Oh, wait! I’m pretty sure there’s a prerequisite for Narcisse too. Something like…you have to take a class with him, or something.”
So to romance him, you had to enroll in a special class? Marie explained that Narcisse was a scholar who investigated the ancient ruins in dungeons. I glanced over at Luxion.
“Neither Noelle nor Lelia have opted into Narcisse’s class,” he said. “Which seems to be highly unpopular. There are hardly any students who take it.”
Apparently, students chose some of their classes at the beginning of each school year.
“There’s still time! As long as she picks his class before her second year, she can still romance him!”
Luxion’s eye moved from side to side, as if he were shaking his head. “Unfortunately, they are already in their second year, and they have already submitted applications to join other special classes.”
Marie blanched. “Uh, hold on a sec. If that’s true, then the only option she has left is Loic.”
And Noelle hated him.
“Are we screwed?” I asked.
Marie dropped her gaze and covered her face. “Why does she hate Loic?! Sure, he comes on a little strong, but he’s rich and he’s *gorgeous*! And he’ll be an important figure in the future. She should be gunning for him!”
Nah, thinking about it realistically, he only looks desirable because you know he’s a love interest in a game. In real life, his status far exceeds the protagonist’s. It makes sense that she wouldn’t even consider him.
“There’s no guarantee yet that Noelle is our protagonist, but I wonder how this will turn out?”
Our reality wasn’t exactly like a game. Sure, maybe we could still pair her off with someone, but who knew if that was really in Noelle’s best interests.
As I puzzled over that, I noticed Marie staring at my hand and wiping drool from her chin. She was fixated on my half-eaten bread.
“Uh, you are eating, aren’t you?” I asked.
Marie scrubbed away her tears. “The boys are still growing. They have a healthy appetite, and we don’t have much money for our daily expenses to begin with. I’ve been trying to scrimp on lunch. I’m just eating one bread roll a day.”
A plain bread roll? I was a bit of a penny-pincher, but even I still had enough to buy flavored bread. Just how bad off were they?
“You could make yourself a lunch box,” I said.

“If I did, I would have to make enough for Julius and the others, duh! Otherwise they’d feel left out. And making enough for seven people is serious work, you know!”
“Okay, okay. Then, uh, do you want this?”
Marie eagerly snatched the bread from my hands. It felt like a reversal of Japanese high school, where boys would get excited when a girl gave them her leftovers.
“Yay! I love you, Big Bro!”
I’d normally respond with something like, *Knock it off. You’re giving me the creeps!* But I felt so bad for her that I didn’t have it in me.
Even Luxion seemed to sympathize. “So this is the tragic fate Marie suffers for trying to achieve a reverse harem ending…”
My heart ached watching her bite into that bread. It made me wonder… even if Noelle was able to win the heart of one of her love interests, would she truly be happy?

***

“You want to know if I’m close with Miss Noelle?”
I was helping Jean carry some teaching materials, so I opted to inquire about his relationship with our possible protagonist. The hallways were crowded as we maneuvered down the corridor.
“Yep. I heard she splits her extra food with you.”
“Um, well, yeah,” Jean admitted, embarrassed.
“I’m jealous,” I said. “Being that close with a beauty like her? And she lives right next door to you? You’re like the main character of a book or something.”
“It’s all coincidence,” he assured me. “A lot happened when we first met, and now we’re pretty close.”
When they first met?
I pressed him for details, and Jean explained that he kept a dog at his place—one he’d brought all the way from home.
“I actually don’t have a family,” he said.
“Wow, this conversation just took a dark turn.”
“Oh, no, um… I mean, that dog is really important to me. She’s like family. Her name happens to be Noelle too. Although she’s pretty old now.”
He’d had her ever since he was born. That made her seventeen years old.
That’s an insanely long life for a dog.
“I knew that I’d never see her again if I left her behind. So I brought her with me. That’s kinda how Noelle and I got to know each other. Because they have the same name.”
So his pet had been the icebreaker that started their friendship.
“You two sure are close.”
“She’s a good friend,” Jean said, smiling.

I felt awful about tearing them apart. Maybe they could at least remain friends.

***

I headed for the tram stop after school to catch a ride back home. That's where I ran into Noelle.

The neighborhood around the academy looked like pictures I'd seen of Japan in the early 1900s, although the uniforms were in more of a modern Japanese style. But once you got accustomed to that dissonance, it stopped feeling strange. There were even some neat antique-looking cars driving around.

Noelle grinned and waved at me. "Oh, Leon! Come over here."

I slid up beside her as we waited for our ride. There were more than a dozen other students on the platform, all busy chatting with their friends. When the tram going in the opposite direction arrived, people piled inside.

"The tram sure is convenient, isn't it?" I said.

You could pay a flat fee and ride it as far as you wanted.

"Really?" she said. "I've never given it much thought. Although, I get the feeling you're more accustomed to it than the other exchange students."

She had good instincts. I always wanted to jump in and experience things for myself rather than just sitting around and thinking about it. That was what made me different from Julius and the others, and Noelle seemed to have picked up on it. Well…I guess I'd also known about trains and stuff from my previous life. And I'd ridden in them plenty of times.

"It's much simpler than an airship," I said. "So it's easy to get used to."

"You own an airship, right?" asked Noelle. "And you make your own money too? You live in a completely different world than the rest of us."

"Pretty impressive, right? Wanna take a ride on my airship sometime?"

Maybe it would help me get more information. Alas, that only seemed to make her put up her guard.

"Are you hitting on me?"

"Come on, that's not what I mean. I just wanna be friends."

"Aww, and here I was hoping you were asking me out," she said, although she didn't sound like she meant it. "Unfortunately, I'm pretty busy. I'll have to take a rain check."

She really did look like the type who was willing to play around, but her walls were surprisingly high. It *did* feel like she had a real wall around her. Or maybe it was just that she already had Jean?

As the two of us kept up the small talk, her expression changed suddenly.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's that nuisance I told you about."

"Oh?" a voice called from behind us on the platform. "Are you cozying up to *another* new boy now? My, my, Noelle, you're such a temptress. How many will it take before you're satisfied?"

Noelle stepped forward, putting herself between me and the other girl. "Louise. Why are you here? Why don't you use all of that cash you have to take a car home already?"
"Oh, don't worry. I already have a car waiting."
"Then go on, shoo!"
As the two girls traded jabs, the people around us exchanged awkward looks. The tension in the air was palpable.
Ah, so this is the villainess, I thought.
The girl in question turned away from Noelle. "You should be careful, you know," she told me. "Nothing good will come of associating with—"
But the moment her gaze landed on me, she froze.
Come on, I'm not that ugly, am I? I pressed my hands to my face, just to make sure I hadn't gotten anything on it. Before I could figure out just what had upset her, the tram rolled in and Noelle snagged me by the arm, dragging me on board.
"We're going, Leon."
"Uh, yeah."
"She called him 'Leon'..." the girl mumbled.
She kept staring at us as we boarded the tram. She even gave chase for a few seconds as it pulled away. Her eyes remained glued to us, even as she gave up and disappeared into the distance.
"What was all that about?" I asked.
I'd come away with the sense that she'd been looking specifically at me, and Noelle seemed to agree.
"Love at first sight? It's the first time I've ever seen her like that," she said.
"You really think I'm her type?" I snorted. Well, she is beautiful. If she's not engaged, maybe I should take my chances?
Jokes aside, she hadn't looked like someone who'd fallen in love at first sight. More like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.
Noelle and I navigated the crowded tram and found some handholds to cling to.
"So, that's the girl who always pesters you?" I asked.
"Yep. Her name is Louise. She's a third-year, and the daughter of the assembly chairman. She's a real pain in my butt."
The students around us glanced at Noelle judgmentally.
"Does Miss Lelia have trouble with her too?" I asked.
Noelle shook her head. "Just me. Lelia has Emile, so Louise doesn't bother her."
"Emile, huh?"
"He's the second son of House Pleven. Louise doesn't want to provoke him."
Was that because they were both members of the Six Great Houses?
From what I remembered of the first game, it didn't matter how much the protagonist cozied up to her love interests, the villainess would still go after her. The whole point of her existence was to disrupt the protagonist's life, whether she had a man or not. Marie had confirmed that was how things

worked in the sequel too, so something strange was going on here. Admittedly, there were some holes in Marie's knowledge. Was something else at play? Something we just didn't know about?
Noelle was still fuming, but she froze suddenly, and her expression changed again.
I frowned. She seems to do that a lot.
"Oh, crap!"
"What's wrong?"
"Today is a special sale day! I was supposed to talk to Lelia about it, but it totally slipped my mind."
She looked so dejected. It reminded me of how jazzed Marie had been earlier about the idea of this sale. She'd mentioned taking Carla and Kyle to buy a crap ton of stuff.
Those guys really are having a rough time.
There was no supermarket here, but they did have a vegetable grocer and butcher right next to each other in the shopping district.
Noelle glanced at me expectantly.
"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I'll help you out," I said.
"Really?! Aww, you're so nice, Leon!" Noelle clapped me on the shoulder. Her lack of personal boundaries really made it easy to misunderstand her intentions.

***

That night, I ate dinner as Luxion gave me his report. The plates floated in from the kitchen and landed right in front of me. To someone who didn't know what was happening, it would've looked a lot like magic.
"I might be living alone, but I'm enjoying this high-class cuisine. Not bad." My mouth watered at the aroma of freshly cooked steak.
"It is a good thing I am here," said Luxion.
"Yup."
But apparently, my response wasn't enthusiastic enough. Luxion's mood took a sullen turn. "You could praise me more, you know."
"You rock."
Luxion grumbled at my lackluster response and then turned his attention to the actual topic of discussion. "Master, I have a report about the love interests."
"Let's hear it."
"While it's true that Narcisse is in charge of his own special class, he has a notable lack of students. In fact, last year there were precisely zero. It's not even being offered next year."
"There go our chances of meeting those conditions."
I had hoped we could get Noelle to trigger the event. But even as I thought that, I remembered Jean and how close the two of them were.

“Same goes for Hugues,” said Luxion. “His engagement is settled. Louise will be his wife.”

If this Hugues fellow was getting stuck with the villainess, then he really had no luck at all. In the first game, Angie had actually been a decent person underneath. This Louise seemed genuinely terrible.

“Hey,” I said, “speaking of Louise, didn’t she seem shocked when she saw me?”

“Does that bother you?”

“Considering no one has ever reacted like that before? Yeah, it does bother me a little. And isn’t it weird that she’s not pestering Lelia *at all*?”

If the villainess only messed with the protagonist, that made Noelle our leading lady. But Lelia was still the only one in a relationship.

“Shall I investigate?” Luxion asked.

I thought about it as I cut into my steak. “Luxion, don’t you think it’s wrong for us to decide who Noelle should be with?”

“It seems a small price to pay for saving the world, don’t you think? Personally, I would be fine with simply wiping this whole planet clean of new humankind.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

As usual, his contempt for new humans knew no bounds. How long was he going to hold this grudge? Wasn’t the war long over?

I stabbed my fork into the meat, admiring it for a moment before I popped it in my mouth.

“Marie would be much more help if she could actually remember more about this game,” I said.

“On that, we can agree.”

Chapter 4:
The Republic's Nobility

BACK IN THE HOLFORT KINGDOM, students were gathered in one of the capital's pubs to welcome the new scholarship students. Olivia had juggled planning the celebration with her busy days at school, so the party was a little belated. However, like Leon, she didn't drink alcohol. Instead, she spent her time looking after everyone else.

"Are you all getting used to life at the academy?" Olivia asked.

As she spoke, some boys in unkempt uniforms followed her every movement with their eyes. Aaron, the former adventurer, had made good friends with two other unscrupulous boys. The three of them leered at Olivia, and they emanated an unsettling air.

"Aaron, she's not drinking."

"Our plan's a wash. How are we gonna get her drunk enough to drag her home with us?"

Despite their complaints, Aaron just grinned as he placed a small jar on the table. "We just need to use this. We'll wait for the perfect opportunity, then I'll spike her drink."

In short, they were up to no good.

"Uh-oh, looks like I found some bad boys!" sang someone behind them.

Cleare had hidden herself with a cloaking device while she kept an eye on everything. As she spoke, she shot mist out from her body.

Alarmed by the strange voice and the sweet aroma, Aaron and his flunkies looked everywhere, trying to identify the source.

"Who was that? And why does it suddenly smell so…sweet…"

A sudden drowsiness hit them, and the three slumped forward onto the table, unconscious.

"You only have yourselves to blame," Cleare sniffed. "You shouldn't try to mess with Livia. Fortunately, I'm not as short-tempered as Luxion. I'll let you keep your lives."

She dropped the cloaking device and surveyed the pub as she sorted out how to dispose of these problems. Fortunately, she spotted a reliable bunch not far away: another group of boys enjoying some drinks by themselves. There were no girls with them, but they seemed to be living it up.

"Aha!"

As Cleare wove her cunning scheme, Livia noticed the three unconscious boys.

"Oh, no! What happened to these guys?"

"They must be exhausted," Cleare said. "It seems they overindulged with some stronger brews and passed out."

"Cleary? What are you doing here?"

“I was worried, so I came to check in on you. But that’s not important. You should get these boys back to their dormitories.”
Livia hesitated, thinking it over. Their welcome party had only just started. “Maybe we should let them rest a while, *then* we can take them home.”
“Wait, it looks like those boys over there are getting ready to leave.” Cleare bobbed to indicate the group of boys she’d been eyeing a second earlier. They were huddled together with their arms around each other’s shoulders, and they were getting up to leave—presumably to head home.
“A-are you sure it’s all right to ask?” Olivia said, sounding doubtful.
“Of course. They would be more than happy to oblige you, I guarantee it.”
“I feel bad imposing on them. Don’t you think it’s our responsibility to make sure these boys get back safely?”
“Trust me, it’s fine. They won’t mind at all.”
“R-really?”
Livia reluctantly edged up to their table. As she did, the atmosphere suddenly shifted.
“Uh, um…”
A few of them glared at her, but a man with slicked black hair and a black beard put on a smile. He seemed to be their leader.
“Is something the matter?”
Livia fidgeted as she glanced back at Aaron and the others. “A-a couple of students drank too much. If you’re heading back to the boys’ dorm, do you think you could take them with you?”
Livia worried she was putting an undue burden on them and readied herself for their anger, but the boys merely glanced at each other. They exchanged a few whispers and then smiled.
“If that’s all, you don’t have to act so bashful. We don’t mind.”
“S-sorry, I was a bit on guard.”
“It’s no problem. We’ll make sure they get back safely.”
Their previous hostility vanished, and they happily agreed to help. They marched right over to Aaron and his friends, scooped them up, and headed for the door.
“Uh, um, are you really sure it’s okay?” Olivia asked, still a little surprised by their newfound generosity. “I’m not causing you all any trouble, am I?”
The leader picked Aaron up in a piggyback and smiled at her over his shoulder. “It’s no problem. We’ll take good care of them.”
“Thank you!” Her shoulders slumped with relief. “I guess it all turned out exactly as Cleary promised…”
With that out of the way, Olivia rejoined the welcome party. Meanwhile, Cleare watched the boys as they hauled Aaron and his friends out of the pub. “Serves you right for trying to lay your hands on Livia.”
She slowly faded into the background, her blue lens glowing eerily.

***

Aaron awoke in the boys' dormitory the next morning. Only, it wasn't *his* room at all. The furniture was different, and another boy was with him. Aaron could only assume that the other guy lived here.

Although perhaps boy wasn't the right word. This fellow was tall and muscular, his black hair flowing down his back as he made coffee. His white shirt was hanging open, leaving his chest exposed.

"Want some coffee?"

Aaron nodded, puzzled as to what was going on. "Yeah, sure."

Sunlight spilled in through the window, making the other man almost glow.

"I carried you back to the dorm last night, but the staff here didn't know which room was yours. Sorry. I had no choice but to let you sleep here."

"S-seriously? Thanks, and sorry for the trouble," Aaron said.

"Nah, it's no big deal."

Aaron was taken aback at how easily he'd thanked this man. Can't believe I actually expressed gratitude for something like this. What the heck is wrong with me?

Normally, he would have complained left and right, but he didn't really feel like doing that today.

Just then, Aaron noticed his uniform, neatly folded and laid out on the bedside table. His head spun as he realized he was in his underwear.

D-did he actually take off my clothes? And ouch, my butt seriously hurts. Aaron patted his rear.

"Sorry," said the man. "I dropped you on the way here. It was hard to keep hold of you. You got pretty feisty."

Aaron must have been more drunk than he'd realized. Did I really have that much to drink? And when did I fall asleep? Crap. I have no idea.

The last thing he remembered was plotting to drug Livia. Obviously, that hadn't worked out. *A-and why do I feel so nervous in front of this guy?*

The other man looked at him, and Aaron's cheeks flushed.

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Cleare was keeping an eye on them both.

"It seems my test was successful. A human *will* mistake a rapid pulse rate for the inception of romantic feelings."

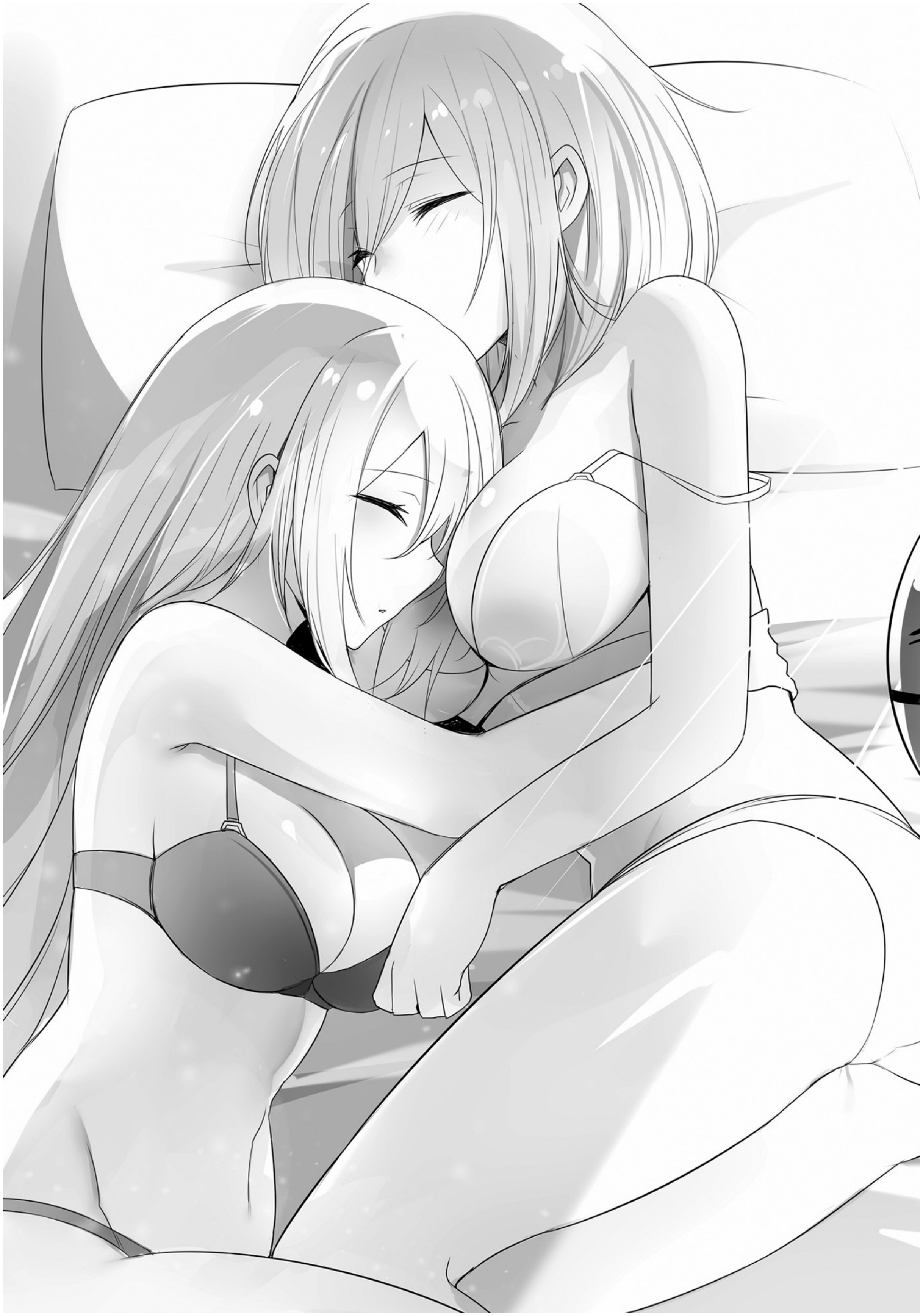
She went to check up on her other test subjects and found them all still sleeping in other boys' rooms.

"I look forward to seeing what the future holds for them."

Cleare was giddy. After all, she *had* been a research AI before Angelica and Olivia repurposed her. As such, she was a more devoted investigator than Luxion.

"I wondered how they would react when thrown into a peculiar situation, but it looks like they aren't much different from the old humans. How intriguing."

She considered procuring a love potion for further experimentation, but it didn’t seem like it would be necessary.
Cleare glanced back at a rustling sound behind her and found Angie and Livia still slumbering soundly together in their underwear.



Angie stirred at the sound of Cleare's musings and sat up, eyes still heavy with sleep.
"Oh, good morning, Angie! Listen to this, I've discovered the most fascinating—"
On the verge of a detailed explanation of what had just transpired, Cleare was shut up when Angie flung a pillow at her. Then Angie flopped back down in bed, using Livia's chest as a pillow as she fell back to sleep.
"Unbelievable!" Cleare grumbled. "Here I am, saving Livia in her time of need, and you have the audacity to assault me with the furniture?! I'm going to send pictures to Master again!"
Cleare's method of revenge largely consisted of taking snapshots of the two girls as they slept. She forwarded the data to Luxion, sure that it would soon fall into Leon's hands.
"Mwa ha ha. This is what you get for angering me. Now, I should go check on my guinea pigs again."
Without Leon's watchful eye to keep her in check, Cleare was taking matters into her own hands. At least, so much as a robot *had* hands.

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I was finally getting used to life in the republic.
"Today was as exhausting as yesterday," I muttered.
I was on my way to the tram when a car suddenly stopped right in front of me. Judging by the exterior, it was an expensive classic. The driver slid out of his seat and smoothly opened the back door.
"Huh?"
I thought he'd mistaken me for someone else. That was, until a girl stepped out. Miss Louise motioned for me to join her inside the vehicle while the students around me erupted in surprise.
"I haven't properly introduced myself," she said. "I'm Louise Sara Rault. You're Leon, right? An exchange student? If you don't mind joining me, I'd like to have a little chat."
I'd never dreamed the villainess would approach me like this. Why was she even interested in me? And why *had* she gawked at me like that when we first met? That still bothered me.
"A chat you say?"
"Yes, that's right. I would be delighted if you'd join me for a ride."
I shrugged and hopped in.
The car's interior was obviously quite expensive, and the cushy seats gave it an aristocratic feel. Louise slipped in beside me, the driver shut his door, and we were off.
A wave of nostalgia hit me as we went. I had no idea if cars here were built anything like the ones in my previous world, but they sure felt the same.
"So, have you grown accustomed to Alzer?" Louise asked, sounding a little nervous.

Jeez, small talk much? Surely this wasn't why she'd invited me into her car.
"Pretty much."
"If you run into any trouble, please let me know. You can even use my name if you need to."
One mention of the Rault family princess, and people would probably do anything for me. Honestly, I was largely too terrified to actually try anything like that.
"That's awfully kind of you," I said.
"Oh? Did you expect me to be malicious? Did Noelle say anything?"
"Something like that." I mean, the only other time we'd met, this girl had been picking on Noelle.
"I'm not always like that, you know," she said.
"I'd believe those words if they came from someone else, but not you."
Miss Louise smiled. "You even sound just like him…"
To be fair, she seemed like a completely different person now than she had on the tram platform. Was it just because Noelle wasn't here?
We chatted casually for a while, and I noticed to driver glaring at me in the rearview mirror.
Oh, knock it off. Just keep your eyes on the road. More importantly, I frowned at Louise. "Now then, what was it you wanted?"
Miss Louise pressed her face close to mine.
"Huh?"
She placed her hand my cheek and stared straight at me, her eyes misting over.
"Wh-what are you…?" I debated yelping that I had my fair share of fiancées already and flinging myself out of the car—but before I could, she said something completely unexpected.
"Hey, would you call me 'Big Sis'? Just once?"
"Sorry, what?"
Listen, a beautiful woman had pressed herself up against me and skewered me with a sensual gaze—I was fully within my rights to assume she was going to confess her feelings or something. I never would have guessed she'd say something like…*that.* Not even I could see that coming.
"Uh, sorry, um…"



“You can’t do it?” she asked. She was getting rejection vibes, and she gave me a dejected look.

She’s gotta be messing with me, right? I winced and tried to clear the air.

“I, uh, have bad memories of my older sister. It’s kinda hard for me to respond to that.”

“Oh, so you *do* have an older sister?”

“Yeah,” I said, chuckling. “She tried to blow me up.”

Her eyes widened. “Th-that certainly is rather extreme. Were you hurt?”

“Nah, I was fine.”

All this talk brought back memories of my duel with the bozo brigade at the end of our first term. Jilk had manipulated my sister into planting a bomb on Arroganz. I’d come out of it unscathed, but no matter how you sliced it, it had been a pretty rotten thing for her to do. Still, given the circumstances, I couldn’t really blame her. No harm, no foul.

“Do you hate her?” Miss Louise asked.

“Honestly? It’s not really that black and white. Guess you could say I detest her, but hate her? Not entirely.”

“You sound like a very kind young man.”

Normally I would’ve found that heartwarming, but this was a pretty awkward situation. Miss Louise had pulled away a bit, but there still wasn’t much space between us. Our thighs were touching, and now she was squeezing my hand.

What the hell is going on here?!

The car was circling the school, so it didn’t seem like we were actually going anywhere. Was she ever going to let me escape?

“Why do you want me to call you ‘Big Sis’?” I asked. “Is it some kind of fetish?”

“It’s not a fetish! I-I don’t know how to explain it, and you probably wouldn’t believe me, even if I did.”

Okay, not a kink. Now I was even more curious. Why else would she make such a request? “All right…why me?”

“B-because you…” Miss Louise looked away, her cheeks brightening. She kept mumbling for a while, trying to explain herself.

Huh. What do you know? She’s actually kinda cute.

But I didn’t have long to reevaluate my feelings about Miss Louise. A sudden transmission from Luxion interrupted my thoughts. “Master, sorry to disrupt your fun time.”

I wanted to snap that I wasn’t having *any* kind of fun, but Miss Louise was beside me, so I forced myself to swallow my sarcasm.

Luxion took my silence as assent. “There’s a problem at the academy.”

Huh?

***

A professor had approached Jean after class to enlist his help. By the time Jean got back to his classroom to gather his things, he was running late.
"Wonder if Noelle's hungry." He wasn't thinking about his schoolmate but his elderly dog.
The room was growing dark as Jean grabbed his bag and headed for the door, only to find a boy standing there blocking his path. Jean recognized him right away. Bad rumors followed Pierre everywhere he went. Worse, he had a gang of his flunkies with him.
"Uh, um?"
The other boys grinned, and Jean stared at them in confusion. He always made sure to have nothing to do with Pierre or his friends.
"You're in charge of keeping those exchange students in line, right?" Pierre asked. "Tsk tsk. Not doing a very good job, are you?"
"K-keeping them in line? Uh, no, I was just told to help if they needed anything…"
But Pierre's flunkies only pressed in closer, surrounding Jean. Jean hugged his bag to his chest and trembled in fear as Pierre sidled up to him.
"Whatever. Doesn't matter. Those guys are an eyesore, and you're basically responsible for them, right?"
"N-no, like I said…" Jean knew Pierre was nothing but trouble. A chill ran down his spine at the thought of what the guy might want with him.
For lack of a better term, Pierre was the academy's problem child. He was the second son of one of the Great Houses, so like all those of the highest tier of nobility, he had a crest on his right hand—proof of the Sacred Tree's blessing. His boys bore similar crests, although theirs were marks of lesser favor. All the same, every last one of these guys were of noble blood.
Pierre grinned. "Come with us. We'll put you straight. You should be honored that someone as great as me is taking time out of his day to discipline you."
It wasn't rare for a noble like Pierre to express disdain for a commoner. The whole republic was divided between those who had the Sacred Tree's divine protection and those who didn't, and everyone who lacked a crest was seen as naturally inferior. Frankly, as far as the aristocracy was concerned, if you didn't have a crest, then you were a lesser being—whether you were a fellow citizen of the republic or an outsider.
"Come on," Pierre crooned. "Let's go out back."
Pierre grabbed hold of Jean, who dropped his bag as the boys dragged him from the classroom.

***

I begged Miss Louise to drop me off at school and scrambled out of the backseat, making a mad dash for the back of the main building.
"Leon, wait!" Miss Louise shouted, stepping out behind me.

I ignored her pleas and hurried onward. Luxion appeared at my right shoulder, dropping his cloak.

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?!" I demanded.

"Jean wasn't one of the people we were keeping tabs on. In fact, you should be praising me for realizing what was happening as quickly as I did."

"Dammit!"

The academy was vast, and by the time I found the problem, it was all over. The only people in the back of the school were a crowd of teachers and a few students who hadn't yet gone home. And in the middle of the crowd was Jean—hanging upside down from a tree.

I gasped for air and stood there, frozen, as the teachers worked to get Jean down. In the chaos, Luxion had reengaged his cloak so that no one would notice him.

"Well, he's still alive," Luxion noted.

The professors brought out a stretcher and lifted Jean onto it.

"This is awful," one of them muttered.

"Think they used magic on him?" asked another.

"The nurse's office won't be able to handle this. We need to get him to a hospital."

I pushed my way through the crowd. "Excuse me, coming through." When I reached Jean, I couldn't help myself—I started shouting. "Hey, get a hold of yourself! Who did this to you?!"

"Hey, stay back."

The teachers tried to pull me away, but before they did, I heard Jean mumble, "Noelle, I'm sorry."

After that, the teachers carried him off, leaving the students murmuring to each other.

"It was *them*."

"Yeah, he must have done something to make himself a target."

"He's just a second-year, right? Poor thing."

All right, good. They knew who was to blame.

I grabbed the closest male student. "Hey, who did this to Jean?"

"What, you mean you don't know?"

I glared at him pointedly. The boy glanced around to make sure no one was listening before he answered.

"It was Mr. Pierre of House Feivel. Whenever he decides he doesn't like someone, he and his cronies string them up in a tree. You'll end up the same way, if you keep sniffing around."

The boy pulled away and retreated. The others were leaving as well.

Pierre of House Feivel? That sounded familiar.

"If I recall correctly, House Feivel are the antagonists who target the protagonist in the middle of the game," Luxion said. "This Pierre is a key individual in one of the game's events. He unwittingly helps the protagonist and her love interest confirm their feelings for each other."

Pierre was your classic aristocratic villain. He went after the protagonist and prompted the love interest to rescue her. After that, the two of them confessed their love. So basically Pierre was a plot device.
“He sure had his fun.”
“I can see you’re contemplating revenge,” said Luxion. “Given your policy on maintaining equilibrium, I would recommend against it. Pierre is integral to the story. If you destroy him, it may have unforeseen repercussions.”
In short, if I wanted to stick to the script, I couldn’t lay a hand on him, huh? That was annoying, but I guess I didn’t have any choice.
“Well, he sure plays the villain well,” I said. “I want to punch his lights out.”
This was stupid. That guy had assaulted Jean, and all I could do was sit on my hands and watch. If I didn’t, I risked screwing up our whole mission.
As I stood there, still frozen, Miss Louise came rushing to the back of the building.
“Leon,” she called out, sounding winded. “What…in the world…is going on?”
“Nothing. Nothing at all.”
Pierre was scum, but if I was going to ignore his actions just so we could keep the plot intact, then I was just as bad.

***

That evening, I went to Jean’s apartment, and once I’d explained the situation to the landlord, I managed to borrow a key. Jean’s place was immaculate. Given how diligent he was about everything, that wasn’t surprising.
As soon as I opened the door, an elderly dog came hurrying toward me. She growled and raised her hackles, but I let her work out her wariness and put out my hand for her to sniff.
“Sorry. Your master’s going to be in the hospital for a bit.”
There was no way for her to understand what I was saying, but she ceased her snarling and licked my hand. She was so weak with age that her legs trembled.
“She doesn’t have very long left,” said Luxion.
“Either way, we’ll look after her until Jean is discharged.”
“Are you trying to atone?”
“Yeah. I can’t make the perp pay for what he did. Not when the safety of the whole world is at stake. I know it’s not like we’re that close, but Jean looked after me.”
I’d even considered breaking up his relationship with Noelle—the human Noelle, at least. The least I could do for the guy was look after his dog.
“He really dotes on this old girl,” I snorted. “He must be worried about her.”

“So we’re up against this Pierre Feivel, hm?” Luxion said. He was more concerned with who to fight than caring for who got hurt. “Seems like the Six Great Houses command quite a bit of authority.”
“They’re nobles. They breed creeps like him all the time.” I hefted Noelle up into my arms and started for the door.
“You need only say the word, and I will destroy the entire country for you,” Luxion reminded me.
True enough, we wouldn’t have to worry about the Sacred Tree if I let him. As far as Luxion was concerned, that was a net win for us.
“If I was going to let you do that, I would never have come here in the first place. And come on, you know I’m never going to let you commit any massacres. Get that through your thick robot skull already.”
Luxion’s grudge against the new humans really knew no bounds. His extremist bent could get pretty troubling.
“I thought you might have a change of heart,” he said. “You *do* tend to flip-flop, as they say.”
“I prefer the term adaptable.”
“I think the problem is that you simply can’t make up your mind.”
We slipped out of the room and locked the door behind us.
I shrugged. “Maybe you have a point. Either way, whichever twin Pierre picks a fight with is probably our protagonist. As annoying as it is to let him buzz around, we don’t have much of a choice.”
But I can think up what awful things I’ll do to him once the plot doesn’t need him anymore.
“What will you do if Noelle turns out to be the protagonist, Master? Will you tear her from Jean and throw her to her stalker, Loic?”
“All I can do is hope that Lelia is the real protagonist.”
I wanted Jean and Noelle to be happy, if that was at all possible. Even as beaten up as he was, Jean had called out her name. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t have feelings for her.
“Hey, uh, what are we going to do about Elle here?” I asked. “What should we feed her?”
“I will tend to her diet,” said Luxion.
If nothing else, I would look after the old girl until Jean made a full recovery.

***

While Angie and Livia were still in bed, another letter arrived from Leon. They eagerly took turns reading it. He’d written about the happenings in the Alzer Republic, and since neither of them had any interest in digital mail, Cleare had printed a copy for them.
As Livia reached the end, her face fell. “So Mr. Leon is looking after an elderly dog, huh?”

“Seventeen is pretty old for a dog,” Angie agreed. “It must be a lot of work to take care of her.”

Leon had said as much in the letter. The dog basically required full-time nursing. However, Leon did note that Luxion was helping him out.

“Still, he seems to be in good spirits,” said Angie. “My only concern is whether he’s getting along a little *too* well with the girls over there.”

Living apart like this so soon after their engagement made Angie uneasy. She couldn’t help but worry that Leon might be cheating.

“I-It will be fine!” Livia assured her, sounding flustered. “He’s said how much he misses us. And besides, he’s not the type to cheat.”

Angie flashed her a small smile. “Oh, you never know,” she teased. “He sure can get a girl’s heart pounding. If I were one of those Alzer girls, I wouldn’t pass up that kind of opportunity.”

“W-well, true.” Tears welled in Livia’s eyes. “He *is* an amazing guy, but I couldn’t take it if he cheated.”

“I’m sorry,” Angie cooed. “Don’t get upset. I don’t want him to cheat either, but that problem *does* seem to be haunting us a bit.” Clarice and Deirdre worried her quite a bit. If she and Livia let their guard down, some enterprising girl would swoop in and steal Leon from under their noses.

“I already warned him,” Angie said. “But if we keep pressing him about it, he’ll grow annoyed. We’re in a real bind.”

“Can’t we just write that cheating is a no-no?”

Angie shook her head. “Leon wouldn’t be very happy if he thought we suspected him, especially if he hadn’t done anything. What do you think, Cleare?”

The robot jolted in midair, taken aback by the question. Angie closed in on her, and Cleare quickly retreated.

“Hey! What’s going on with you?”

“N-nothing!” said Cleare. “I’m just in the middle of an experiment, and I think he’d be a bit, ah, put out if he found out what I’d been up to.”

“Hold on. What’s this ‘experiment’ you’re talking about?”

“I-I am afraid I…can’t really disclose the details at this time!” sang Cleare. She really was much more free-spirited than Luxion.

Livia frowned. “Cleary, you know better!”

At this scolding, Cleare burst out crying and fled the room—not that her round little robot body could produce actual tears. “You two are so cruel! You know I’m doing my best for you!”

“H-hey!”

“Cleary?!”

Angie and Livia scrambled after the errant AI.

Chapter 5:
Oath to the Sacred Tree

AN OPPRESSIVE AIR hung over the classroom the next morning. All the students were talking about the severity of Jean's injuries.

"Did you hear? He got hung from a tree out back."

"The minute you piss off the nobles, you're done."

"Poor guy. There's nothing we can do. Those guys are all blessed with divine protection."

As far as the Alzerians were concerned, that protection meant everything. Anyone lucky enough to receive it was considered nobility. Aristocracy in Alzer had nothing to do with hereditary bloodlines, like in Holfort. You got your status from the Sacred Tree's recognition. Without that, you were nothing. Meanwhile, anyone who *had* divine protection could treat you however they liked.

"What an awful country," I muttered.

Noelle stared down at the floor. After everything that had happened to Jean, she was doubtless depressed.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Her face was white as a sheet, but she nodded. "I'm fine. I'm just worried about Jean. I doubt he can afford the medical fees, and who will look after his dog?"

Noelle couldn't look after Elle because there was a rule against keeping animals at her apartment complex.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "I'm looking after the old girl."

"You are?" Her eyes widened in surprise, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad to hear it. Jean absolutely adores her. I'm sure he'll feel better knowing that she's being taken care of."

"Yeah, I hope so."

"I thought about hiding her at my place," Noelle admitted. "But this works out well. Oh, um, would you mind if I came over to check in on her?"

"Of course, you're more than welcome," I said tightly. I smiled just as tightly, and I really felt the strain of trying to get the expression up to my eyes.

"Something tells me that I'm not actually welcome…"

It was technically a good opportunity to get closer to Noelle, but I felt so guilty about Jean that I couldn't think straight.

Just as Noelle's mood was beginning to brighten anyway, Professor Clement waltzed into the room.

"Quiet, everyone. I am sure you have all heard what happened yesterday, but it's time to begin homeroom now." His expression was more severe than usual, but he kept sneaking glances at Noelle. I could tell he was worried about her.

***

Since Noelle and I were going home together, I waited for her after school.
“She sure is taking forever.”
“She did mention that she had to explain the situation to Lelia,” Luxion reminded me.
The two of them lived together, and Noelle didn’t want her twin worrying when she came home late today. It made sense that being an older sister came with its own hardships. It reminded me of my own jerkbot of a sister back home. How wonderful it would have been to have a sibling like Noelle. Mine did all she could to work me to the bone. *Maybe it’s not too late to trade her in?*
“Master, we have a slight problem.”
“What is it this time?”
“Loic, one of the love interests, is closing in on Noelle. I am classifying this as a dangerous situation.”
I rolled my eyes. “Come on, give me a break.”
“I will show you the way.”
I hurried after him as he led me through the school. What could be so threatening about a love interest?
As I turned the corner, I ran past Miss Louise. She glanced up at me as I dashed breathlessly through the halls, her interest piqued.
“What’s all the hurry for?” she asked.
“Uh, sorry, but I don’t have time right now. You’ll have to excuse me!”
“Wait. Tell me what’s going on!”
“Can’t! It’s a Noelle thing—”
The moment I said that, her face hardened.
Yikes! Does she really hate Noelle that much?

***

Noelle stumbled back into the wall of a deserted hallway. “What are you doing?!” she yelped.
“That’s what I want to know.” Loic slammed his hand against the wall by her head and glared, not even flinching as the noise echoed through the halls. He pressed his face intimidatingly close to hers. “What’s this I hear about you going to some guy’s house?”
Why does he have to act this way? It’s gross. A chill ran down Noelle’s spine. As beautiful as Loic was, he made her stomach churn. “Don’t touch me!”
Noelle cursed silently and shoved at him, trying to fight him off. Unfortunately, Loic was taller and more powerful. She only managed to force him back a few inches.

“I don’t need your permission to do anything*,*” she went on. “And stop going around telling everyone I’m your girlfriend! I have enough problems as it is.”
Clearly someone in class had ratted her out, but Noelle was having none of it. Did Loic have someone spying on her? Everything about him was repulsive.
She’d thought rejecting him outright would only make him angrier, but to Noelle’s surprise, Loic was grinning. A maniacal grin. A terrifying one.
Noelle tried to retreat, but her back was already against the wall. There was nowhere to go.
“You’re at the end of your rope, Noelle.”
“Y-your threats won’t work on me,” she warned. “I’m not going to let you control me, no matter what you say.”
“You misunderstand,” said Loic. “*Pierre* has his eyes on you.”
“Huh?” Noelle gaped. She hadn’t expected that.
Loic just smiled. “He wants to get to those exchange students. That’s why he’s targeting the people looking after them.”
“No way… So *he* was responsible for stringing Jean up like that?”
“Exactly. And you’ll be next. But if you become my woman, he won’t be able to lay a hand on you. What’ll it be, Noelle?”
Loic knew all about Pierre’s schemes, but his only interest was in taking advantage of them to serve his own ends.
Noelle launched a kick right between his legs. “To hell with that!”
“Urgh!” Loic cradled his man bits, face contorted in agony.
Noelle glared down at him coldly. “Using others to get leverage over me? Don’t you feel ashamed of yourself? I *hate* men like you!”
Loic curled forward, cold beads of sweat trickling down his forehead. He was still grinning. “A-as strong-willed as ever, I see. But you’re being naive. Emile can’t save you. Don’t even *think* of relying on him. I’m the only one who can help.”
Emile was also from one of the Six Great Houses, and he was Lelia’s boyfriend. Noelle had always figured that if she needed his help, he would gladly offer it. But Loic didn’t seem to think so.
“Even if he *does* try to help, I’ll just join forces with Pierre,” Loic threatened. As the heir of House Barielle, Emile couldn’t openly oppose Loic if he backed Pierre.
But that just pissed off Noelle even more. I can’t believe him! Why does Lelia always defend this guy?!
“You’d stoop to aligning yourself with someone like Pierre?” Noelle clenched her fists in frustration. There was nothing she could do. *He really is the scum of the earth.*
Loic fought through the pain and managed to pull himself up. He gave her a strained, wry smile and clapped her on the shoulder. “If you were mine, you would never know hardship. You know your little sister wants this for you.

But if you refuse? If you run into the arms of another guy, then I would just as soon…”
The crest on the back of his hand glowed red.
“No one would ever willingly choose to be with you!” Noelle spat.
“We’re not going to make it!” a distant voice called from down the hall.
“Screw it, I’ve got no choice.”
“Master, what are you planning to do? Master! D-don’t you dare—”
Noelle turned, surprised by the commotion. Loic did the same—just as a white metal sphere slammed into his face.
“Augh!”
Blood sprayed from Loic’s nose, and he collapsed to the floor. The strange white ball clattered down beside him, but it soon lifted back into the air, turning the red circle on its surface back toward Leon.
“Strike!” Leon pumped his fist. “Just kidding, heh.”
“You only hit him because I changed my trajectory midway,” scoffed the ball. “You would have missed him by a mile had I not, what with your lack of control. More importantly, don’t you have something to say to me?”
“Yeah, I guess I do.” Leon snorted with laughter. “You’re much easier to throw than I expected.”
“It seems I was right to despise you, Master.”
“Oh, yeah? Well, that makes two of us, Destructo-maniac.”
“I demand you take that back. My name is Luxion, not ‘Destructo-maniac.’”
“Ah, but what a magnificent name it is. You should be thanking me for bestowing it upon you.”
“Master, don’t you think you should show a little more appreciation?”
“I do. In my own way.”
Were these two friends or what?
“Um, what’s going on?” Noelle asked, thoroughly confused.
Loic slowly peeled himself off the floor, pinching his nose as blood continued to gush out. “You bastard. You’re one of the exchange students, aren’t you?”
He was absolutely livid. The mark on his hand glowed a fierce red. He was going to use the seal’s power.
“Leon, run!” Noelle cried.
But Loic shoved her out of the way as she tried to put herself between them. He raised his hand toward Leon. “It’s too late!”
Before he could act, someone else stepped in. Louise. Like Loic, the crest on the back of her right hand was glowing. “Are you so eager to make an enemy of me, Loic?”
He dropped his arm. “Louise? Why are you covering for this guy?! This scumbag put his hands on my woman!”
Louise chuckled airily, crossing her arms. “Oh, really? I didn’t know she was involved with you. Perhaps you should work on distinguishing reality from your own delusions.”
“Do you truly intend to oppose me?”

They were both descendants of great houses—standing against each other like this was no small matter.
“Oh? You want to make even bigger problems for yourself?” Louise asked. “You’re the one at a disadvantage here, Loic. Not me.”
“Ugh…”
The strength of their crests was equal, but the power their families wielded was not. The head of House Rault was the current chairman of the assembly. As such, Louise held more authority.
Loic turned his back on the group, glancing briefly at Noelle. “Don’t forget what I said. I’m your only choice!”
And with that, he left.
Noelle turned to Leon and Louise. What a strange pair they made.
“Louise? Why are you helping me?” Noelle couldn’t fathom why she’d stick her neck out like that.
“Help *you*?” Louise scoffed. “Please, don’t get the wrong idea. Leon made a request, and I obliged.”
Leon chuckled. The white sphere bobbed beside him, its single eye gleaming red. It pressed as close to Leon as it could, almost as though it was trying to intimidate him.
“It’s true,” said Leon. “I asked her to help.”
“Oh, okay then…” Noelle couldn’t think of anything else to say. Her feelings were a giant mess of confusion. She at least owed them a few words of gratitude. “Well, whatever the case, you saved me. And I appreciate it. Thank you both.”
Louise spun around, turning her back on Noelle. “Don’t thank me.” She looped her arm through Leon’s. “Why don’t you come with me now?”
Noelle quickly grabbed for his other arm. “No way. We already have plans.”
Leon’s expression grew disconcerted as the two girls pulled him in opposite directions. “Uh? What’s going on here? Hey, Luxion, help me out.”
The robot looked away. “This is what they call two-timing,” he mumbled.
“You jerk! You’re really going to abandon your master? What are you muttering to yourself?!”
“I merely want you to reflect on your actions. And I demand you apologize for throwing me. If you refuse, I will report the current situation to those waiting back home.”
“You really are a total douche!”
Louise tugged at Leon’s arm. “Come, come. You need only give me a little time. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”
Leon tilted his head. “Who?”
“My parents,” Louise murmured shyly.
“Huh?!”
Noelle’s jaw dropped, but she recovered before Leon could.
“A-are you crazy? You’re the princess of House Rault!” What was Louise thinking?! *Don’t tell me she’s seriously fallen for him?*

“D-dummy!” Louise scolded, sounding flustered. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I have my reasons!”
The two girls kept pulling Leon’s arms, jerking him from side to side.
Suddenly, Luxion’s voice cut through the banter. “Master, we have another situation.”

***

While Leon was dealing with that mess, Brad was called to the back of the school. There, he found himself surrounded by a group of boys.
Brad twisted a lock of his hair between his fingers. “I came here at your request. What exactly is this about?”
Of course, the person who’d sent for him was none other than Pierre.
“For a bunch of nobles from a third-rate country, you guys sure have been acting pretentious.” Pierre made a gagging face. “You’re an eyesore.”
Brad sighed. “Seems you Alzerian nobles are even more belligerent than the rumors led me to believe. I am of the aristocracy as well, you understand. You may hail from one of the Six Great Houses, but don’t dare start something with me. You’ll bring an international scandal down on your heads.”
Pierre’s lackeys cackled, fully aware of what they were getting into.
For himself, Pierre quirked a brow, his right eye bulging with manic intensity. “How entertaining. You should be honored, then. I’ll be dealing with you myself.”
“You sure are confident.”
“Do it, boys!”
Brad glanced from one side to the other. Pierre’s flunkies charged, swinging wooden swords.
“Take this!”
Brad sidestepped and smoothly shoved his opponents, sending them stumbling.
“You bastard!” one of them spat, scrambling back to his feet.
Brad sighed inwardly. Are these guys serious? They’re not playing around, are they?
The nobles of Holfort were descended from adventurers, and it was customary for students at the academy to dive into the capital’s dungeon to beef up their skills. Brad wasn’t the type to duke it out on the front lines, but he was still far stronger than anyone in Pierre’s gang.
“Try this on for size!”
Another boy came charging from behind, and Brad slammed his knee into the boy’s stomach—swiping the wooden sword out of his hands. As the fight continued, Brad continued to beat off anyone who came for him.
Looks like all that training is paying off. In fact, he was quite pleased with himself, although he kept it hidden behind a cool mask as he studied Pierre.
“Are we done here?”

Pierre growled at his minions. “Tsk, you puny excuses for men!”
But as far as Brad could see, Pierre was the puniest of them all. “I would prefer to avoid further violence. Shall we withdraw for now?” he asked, hoping he wouldn’t need to embarrass them further.
Then Pierre threw up his right hand. “Moron! Bladework isn’t everything!”
His minions followed his example, flinging their hands toward Brad.
“Fireball!”
“Ice Needle!”
“Energy Bolt!”
Each of them fired off their most powerful spell.
Are these guys insane?! Brad was surprised, but he kept his head and responded in kind. The thing was, he was far more talented at magic than he was with a sword.
“Earth Wall.” Brad stabbed his sword into the ground, erecting a shell around himself and effortlessly blocking their attacks.
Pierre’s goons soon realized they were outmatched and turned to Pierre, practically begging him to step in.
“You all really are worthless!” Pierre snapped.
“Let’s just call it quits here,” Brad said soothingly. “You’re obviously outmatched.”
He thought it best to take the diplomatic route, even if he really was faring quite well against them.
All the same, Pierre just grinned maniacally.
What’s with him? Brad braced himself.
Pierre lifted his hand, and the crest on his hand began to glow. “Now you’ve *really* pissed me off, you no-name third-rate noble!”
A magic circle lit up beneath Brad’s feet, and the wall he’d conjured crumbled into dust.
“What?!” He brandished his wooden sword in a panicked attempt to defend himself, but tree roots suddenly shot out of the ground and attacked him.
Brad tried to parry the tree’s blows, but his weapon splintered. Even worse, when he tried to use his magic, something strange happened.
“Tsk, Fire Lance!” At first, he thought the roots had deflected his flames, but that wasn’t it—his spell never even materialized. “Wh-what’s going on?!”
Brad’s magic hadn’t failed him. It was more like something had stopped the spell entirely.
The roots wrapped around his feet, lifting him up into the air and holding him upside down. Brad struggled to free himself, but the tree just squeezed his ankles even tighter.
“Dammit!”
Pierre’s flunkies circled around him while Pierre kept his hand up, his crest glowing. They all sneered menacingly. With no other way to defend himself, Brad braced his arms over his head.

Pierre raised his hand to his forehead, still pointing at Brad with the other. He cackled. “Where did all that bravado go, huh? Now we’ll punish you for your insolence. Once we’re done with you, you won’t have such a pretty face anymore!”

As frustrated as Brad was, he didn’t let it show. What a fine mess I’ve gotten myself into. Marie, Julius…everyone. I hope you forgive me for the trouble this will cause.

For a split second, Brad found himself wondering what Leon would do. That single thought replaced his anxiety with something quite different. He grinned.

“Now!” Pierre howled. “Punish him!”

***

The mansion that the republic had prepared for Marie and her entourage was spacious and extravagant. It even had its own gardens. Unfortunately, she and the boys were still on probation after the fiasco in the kingdom. As such, they had only been assigned a few servants to help maintain the place, and those servants didn’t even live on the premises—they merely came by to attend to their duties. That left Marie, her boys, and her followers in charge of their own dinner.

Kyle was preparing plates in the dining hall while Greg sat with his face on the table, waiting to be served. “Is it still not ready yet? I’m starvin’.”

Greg had been whining for several minutes, and Kyle was sick of it.

“If you’re that impatient, you could always lend us a hand.”

“Impossible. I’m so hungry I can’t even move.”

Kyle wanted to punch him in the head, but he restrained himself. Instead, he turned toward the sound of Marie and Carla’s voices echoing from the kitchen.

“Boil more pasta!”

“Yes, my lady!”

“Ugh! Why do they have such huge appetites?!”

All eight of them were still growing, and that made meal preparations quite intense. Worse yet, aside from Kyle, none of the boys would lift a finger to help.

Kyle sighed and glanced at Greg. “Where are the others?” He hadn’t seen them in the dining hall yet.

“Julius and Jilk are in their rooms, getting ready for tomorrow. They take this stuff way too seriously. And I think Chris said he’d be in the garden swinging his sword, since he has nothing else to do.”

Oh, yeah? What about helping out for once? But Kyle thought better of saying that out loud. Well, they are all rich kids. I guess that to them, it’s only natural that servants should do all the menial labor.

It was futile to hope for anything more. As he reflected on that, there was a clamor at the door. It flew open, and Chris’s voice echoed through the halls.

“Everyone? There’s trouble!” His voice was strained with tension.
Alarmed, Marie poked her head out of the kitchen to see what was happening.

***

Marie came scurrying to the front entrance. She was still wearing an apron, and her hair was pulled back for cooking. As soon as she saw Brad, her eyes went wide.
“What happened?!”
He was tied up and lying on the ground. Sitting on top of him was a student from the academy.
“Heya, third-rate nobles. Hope you’re having a good evening. The name is Lord Pierre of House Feivel.”
Marie stared at Brad’s swollen face. She tried to scramble over to him, but Julius caught her by the shoulder. “What are you doing, Julius? Let me go!”
“Calm down, Marie. Brad’s alive. For now, the more pressing issue is that man on top of him…and the minions he’s brought.”
Pierre was surrounded by his lackeys, and there were several cars parked in the street. They were all luxury models and appeared to have been modded.
Pierre locked eyes with Julius, grinning from ear to ear. “So you’re the former crown prince of the Holfort Kingdom. The one that fell from grace. You know you look really pathetic right now, right?”
Marie’s temper flared. Why is this jerk here?! And how dare he talk to Julius like that. He’s the ugly one!
“Are you the ones who hurt Brad?” Julius asked calmly. His voice was cold as ice.
Pierre smirked. “That’s right. He was pathetic. Didn’t even put up a fight. You’re all weaklings. Why don’t you go back home?”
Jilk hung back behind Julius and Marie, flexing his hand and ready to reach for his weapon. A vein bulged on Greg’s forehead as he restrained himself from charging in, while Chris still held a sword in his hand from practicing moments before. Kyle and Carla hid behind them all, but Julius remained at the front, speaking for their group.
“I ask that you hand Brad over.”
“Sure. That’s why I dragged him all the way here, after all. Oh, by the way, I’ve got a little bone to pick with you lot. Why don’t you play with me?”
Marie had a bad feeling about this. Uh-oh. I feel like I’m forgetting something important. What was it?
Pierre lifted himself up off of Brad. “I challenge you to a match. You can have your little friend back whether you win or lose. But if I win, you give me your ship. I’ll even swear on the Sacred Tree, if it makes you feel better. If you refuse, you’re not getting him back.”
Their ship? Was he talking about the *Einhorn*?

But…that belongs to my brother. We can't bet with that! Also, wasn't there something about swearing on the Sacred Tree?
"We can't accept," Julius said—to Marie's relief. "Bartfort owns that ship. I have no right to it."
"Oh, yeah? Then I guess I'll just have to kill your buddy here." Pierre grabbed a fistful of Brad's hair, pulling his head off the ground.
"Wait!" Julius blurted. "I'll accept, but I can't bet the ship—"
Pierre just cracked a maniacal grin. The crest on the back of his hand lit up. "You said you accept! You swore on the Sacred Tree!"
Pierre threw his hands to the sky and cackled wildly, as if he'd already won.
"Wh-what are you talking about?" Julius asked, unnerved.
Suddenly, Marie remembered the problem. "N-no! You can't accept this match!"
But a magic circle had already appeared beneath Pierre, and it expanded until it enveloped them all. Marie stared down at it, the color draining from her face.
I just remembered. In the game, this jerk invents a wild excuse to go after the protagonist, and then…
"The moment you agreed, you made a pact with the Sacred Tree," Pierre leered. "Now you can't back out! Any oath made on the tree is unbreakable. If you don't stay true to your word, you'll *die*!" He howled like a lunatic, jabbing a finger at Julius. "The rules of this match are simple: you and your friends will kill each other until only one is left standing."
That was the last straw.
"That's enough of your nonsense!" Jilk tried to whip out his handgun, but thin roots and ivy shot out of the circle, trapping them all.
Marie tried to free herself from the tendrils wrapped around her neck, but she was no match for them.
Pierre shoved his hands in his pockets and snickered. "You're the ones who're full of it. You swore to the Sacred Tree that you'd accept my match. Now hurry up and start killing each other or you've already lost!"
Marie gritted her teeth. What is wrong with this guy? He was petty and underhanded in the game, but this goes way beyond that! Besides, this bet he forced us into…
The *Einhorn* belonged to Leon. If it got stolen, Marie would be in big trouble.
Forget wearing out my brother's patience, we'd be tearing it to shreds!
Julius glared at Pierre. "We can't kill each other. Besides, these irrational terms can't be legitimate!"
"This isn't a third-world country like Holfort. Alzer is undefeated. If you honestly thought you would be treated fairly here, you were naive."
Pierre was right about Alzer's track record. As Julius and the others simmered with resentment, pain shot through their necks.
"Wh-what is this?!" Greg gasped, ripping the vines away from his neck. They left an inky mark on his skin that looked like a collar.

“Greg, there’s something on your neck,” Chris said.
“You too!”
They had all been marked with these strange collar-like tattoos.
Once the magic circle disappeared, the roots and ivy stopped moving.
“Like I said, an oath made on the tree is unbreakable,” Pierre explained. “The tree doles out its own punishment to the cretins who dare defy it. If you don’t keep your promises, you’re gonna lose your heads.”
Julius’s eyes widened. The boys whipped around to look at Marie. Just like them, she had a mark engraved on her skin. It enraged the boys to see, but they could do nothing about it.
Pierre strolled over to one of the waiting vehicles. “Guess it’s time to go see what a ship from a third-world country looks like—seeing as it belongs to me now.”
As he and his henchmen left, Julius raced toward Marie, his voice trembling with concern. “Are you all right?!”
“Tell…”
“What?”
“Tell Leon what happened. Now! And whatever you do, don’t piss him off, okay? You just make sure he understands. If…if we don’t bring him up to speed immediately, it’s going to be a disaster!”
“Y-yes, all right! I will inform him at once.”
To a one, Marie’s boys were startled by how visibly shaken she was. Chris immediately ran off to update Leon on the situation.

***

As troublesome as the Noelle vs. Louise predicament was, I managed to extricate myself and return home.
For crying out loud, why am I so popular all of a sudden? I was already lucky enough to be engaged to two amazing women in Holfort. Who could have predicted I would come here only to be fussed over by two more?
“What do you think, old girl? Pretty incredible, huh?” I was doting on Elle the second I came through the door.
I’d wound up refusing Miss Louise’s invitation, and Noelle and I had decided she would come visit another day.
The dinner Luxion had prepared for Elle looked like slop to me, but she gobbled it down. Then she curled up on a blanket I’d laid out for her, looked up at me, and panted happily.
We’d prepared a baby bed for her to sleep in, mostly so she wouldn’t put too much strain on her hips by jumping around. It had turned out to be even more effective than I’d imagined.
“Huh, you ate all your dinner.”
She seemed to be in pretty good health today. As I watched her, Luxion floated up to me.
“What is it?” I asked.

“I calculated the precise ratio of nutrients she required, as well as the proper quantity. It’s no surprise she consumed it all. I planned it exactly.”
Was he still sour about me chucking him at Loic? *What an annoying AI.*
“You got some kinda problem?” I asked.
“I should think the answer would be obvious, but if I must spell it out for you, then yes. I do.”
“Is that any way to treat your master?”
“As a matter of fact, I regret recognizing you as my master in the first place.”
“That so? Well, that sure sucks for you.”
As I bantered with my sulky partner, Elle suddenly lifted her head. Her ears twitched as if she could hear something going on outside. A few seconds later, someone banged violently on my door.
“Who could it be at this hour?” I muttered.
“Master, I am not finished. We need to have a serious discussion about our future.”
“Yeah, yeah, we can do that later.”
I moseyed out of the room and made my way to the front entrance. When I opened the door, I found Chris banging on it like a wild animal. He was panting hard. Had he run all the way here from their mansion?
“What’s wrong?” I asked.
“Bartfort, my apologies!”
“For what?” I opened the door the rest of the way and invited him in. I definitely needed to know what the hell was going on.

Chapter 6:
Betrayal

NIGHT HAD FALLEN, but it was still noisy in the harbor. As I headed to where the *Einhorn* was anchored, I found a crowd of people already boarding her. A crest glowed faintly on the vessel's hull. That had to be the mark of the Sacred Tree.

Marie and the others trailed up to me, looking apologetic.

"I-I'm so sorry. You see…" Marie blanched. Her whole body trembled as she tried to explain.

I held up my hand to stop her. "Chris already told me. You have some nerve, betting my ship like that."

Julius stepped forward, trying to defend her. "That wasn't what happened! They're the ones who—"

Before he could finish, a boy leaped down from the ship. Pierre, presumably. He had the same purple hair as Brad, but he lacked Brad's refined air.

"So, you're the previous owner of this ship, I take it?"

"*Previous* owner?" I asked.

The other people crawling all over the *Einhorn* were probably his lackeys. They leered down at me from the deck, drinking alcohol and cackling.

"Aw, did the poor widdle babies come to get their ship back?"

"You're out of luck."

"Yup. Oppose the Sacred Tree and you're dead meat."

It irked me to see them mess with the *Einhorn* like this.

Pierre leaned toward me. "This ship belongs to me now. You see that crest? The Sacred Tree recognizes me as its owner. If you try to take it back, you'll be punished. Want to test your fate?"

I was genuinely curious to see what would happen, but now wasn't the time.

"Given your attitude, I can't see this working, but I'll try anyway: I'd like you to give me the ship back."

Pierre hocked and spat at me. His slimy spittle landed right on my forehead.

"No."

"No, huh?"

"I never expected this ship to amount to much," said Pierre. "I figured I'd just destroy it in front of you. But it actually suits me quite well. That Armor you have might look like a piece of junk, but it's powerful. I'll make good use of it."

He'd already examined Arroganz? He moved fast.

Luxion, who had been hovering above my shoulder, floated toward Pierre and whipped around to face me, his red lens gleaming. Pierre was more shocked than I was.

"What is this thing?!" he demanded.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Luxion, and I manage the *Einhorn*. Since you now own the vessel, I have registered you as my master. I will be happy to serve you henceforth.”
“Luxion,” I growled, glaring at him.
He turned away from me.
Marie went into panic mode. “H-hold it right there! Isn’t Leon your master?!”
“He was until a few moments ago,” Luxion said coldly. “But not anymore.”
Marie’s face fell. “Y-you have to be kidding me…”
Pierre seemed to get the gist of what was happening. He slapped his hand on Luxion and chuckled. “I see what’s going on. This little familiar is how you managed this ship. That’s how you were able to move such an enormous vessel with so few crew.”
“Yes,” said Luxion. “As long as you have me, there is no need for a crew.”
“Incredible! Now I like this even more.” Pierre laughed gleefully. “Well, what do you think? How does it feel losing your familiar *and* your ship? If you’ve learned your lesson, then never set foot in the republic again. Although, if you *really* wanna try to steal it back, come at me any time. I’d be happy to crush you.”
Pierre wasn’t bluffing. I was sure he had no qualms about taking on the whole of the Holfort Kingdom if it came to it.
This situation really couldn’t get any worse.
“In that case, why don’t we have a little bet?” I offered.
Pierre shook his head. “You have nothing to put on the table. You think I’d waste time on you? If you want me to accept your challenge, you gotta bring me something *at least* as good as this ship. Even then, you’ll never beat me.”
I wiped his spit from my forehead and spun around to leave. “You’d better not forget what you said.”
“I meant every word,” Pierre promised. “You bring me something to rival this ship, and I’ll be happy to take you on.”
He cackled, sounding every bit the evil villain.
Marie followed close behind me as I left.
Okay, I thought. Now what?

***

The moment they got back to the estate, Marie sank down on the floor. Cold sweat poured down her back, and she didn’t dare lift her head. Leon walked around her in a slow arc.
“So, you’re telling me that you failed to stop Julius from agreeing to a match that none of you were prepared for. Is that right?”
“I’m sho shorry!”
She bit her tongue in her haste to apologize, but that was inconsequential. All that mattered was Leon’s boiling rage.

They had been siblings in their previous lives, so Marie knew full well not to provoke his anger. She always made sure not to wear on his patience. As long as she did that, he always obliged her. But when Leon snapped, his anger was…abnormal. Whoever pissed him off was screwed.

She remembered one incident from their previous lives. It had happened when Leon was still in elementary school, and the class bullies had made him their target. Marie had only learned about what happened long afterward. Before their mother told Marie the story, she'd always thought that Leon was pretty spineless.

Three boys had bullied him. No one knew precisely how Leon had responded, but all three kids had wound up transferring. Before they left, the leader had come to their house to complain. Apparently, Leon had laughed in his face and told him, "Good luck at your new school. You're gonna need it there too." After that, the boy ran home crying.

Leon had only been in elementary school, but he'd managed to drive his tormentors away. Marie couldn't even begin to fathom how he'd done it. When she was in junior high, she'd sworn to herself that she would never piss off her brother. Lazy as he was, when Leon took action, he was thorough.

"An oath to the Sacred Tree?" Leon asked. "I don't remember hearing a word about this. Am I just being forgetful? Isn't that something I should have known about?"

Marie trembled. "I didn't tell you about it," she acknowledged. "That was my fault."

"Aha! So, you forgot to tell me, huh? That's unfortunate, *Miss* Marie."

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she frantically blinked them back. *I can't cry. It'll only piss him off more if I start sobbing.*

She dropped her head, prostrating herself before him.

By all rights, Pierre was the one in the wrong. Marie just wanted Leon to listen and understand. But if he really was this enraged, her excuses would only add more fuel to the fire. And worse, Leon had already lived through a war.

On TV, they say that those experiences desensitize people and make it easier for them to pull the trigger in the future!

If her experience in her previous life had taught her anything, it was this: If Leon decided to make someone his target now, their life would be forfeit.

Pierre, you absolute moron! Why did you have to provoke my brother?! And now he's calling me "Miss Marie" like I'm a total stranger!

Marie sobbed. "Please forgive me! I swear I'll do anything!"

"Yes, that's the spirit. Why don't we test your sincerity? But before that, hurry up and heal Brad."

When they got him back, they'd performed what emergency treatment they could and put him in bed.

Marie sprang up, gave her brother a stiff bow, and scrambled toward the door. "I really am sorry! Please excuse me!"

She scurried away as quickly as she could, wiping the tears from her eyes.
I screwed up big time! I'm definitely on his murder list! At this rate, my second life will be over before I know it. Or maybe he'll just abandon me to my miserable fate? Oh, please no, I don't want that either!
For the first time in a while, Marie's brain was firing on all cylinders, trying to concoct a plan to get out of this mess.

***

"Did I go a little overboard on the intimidation?" I asked myself.
I was still pretty irked about them letting Pierre take my ship. To be fair, venting that anger on Marie seemed to have worked wonders for her motivation. Admittedly, it wasn't really her fault that things had gone south. Seeing how upset she was, I actually felt a little bad. Threatening her like that had probably been punishment enough.
"Pierre is the real problem. Why is he even messing with us?"
The worst part about this whole thing was that we needed him to get through a pivotal event in the game. I'd never dreamed he would come after us. He was meant to target the protagonist, which is why I'd had Luxion monitor Lelia and Noelle. That sure had blown up in my face.
"So, he's got the *Einhorn*, and Luxion's taken his side too..."
I felt lonely without my partner floating above my shoulder.
"I guess the real issue is what happens from here."
I didn't like not knowing what Pierre would do next. Would he *ever* mess with the protagonist? Or had the whole story already gone off the rails? Life sure didn't go as planned.
"Maybe Luxion really was pissed at me..."
He'd seemed pretty cross when he switched sides. Or had that been my imagination?

***

When Noelle came to school the next day, a strange atmosphere hung over the classroom.
"Morning!"
No one replied. They refused to even look at her.
"Huh? What's going on?" Noelle was unnerved, but the oddities didn't end there. "Uh, why are some desks missing?"
There were two open spots where Leon and Brad had sat. Noelle glanced around, but her classmates all looked away. Brad and Leon were nowhere to be seen.
"What's the meaning of this?" Noelle slid up to one of her friends, but the girl wouldn't meet her eye. "What happened?"
"Uh, um..."

As the girl fumbled for words, a boy Noelle knew spoke up instead. “The exchange students picked a fight with the nobles. Those same nobles told us to get rid of all of them. And that includes you, actually. What did you do to piss them off?”
“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me! I haven’t done a freakin’ thing! More importantly, are you guys seriously going to obey them?”
Noelle’s classmates refused to look at her. The Six Great Houses were absolute. Anyone blessed by the Sacred Tree not only held authority, they were imbued with some of its power. If you opposed them, you would never live freely.
Noelle fled the classroom only to run into Loic—waiting for her in the hallway.
He grinned. “Good morning, Noelle.”
A shiver ran down her spine. “Loic, you creep…”
“Feel like accepting my love now?”
Yup, he was most definitely involved in all of this. Will he really go that far? And why is he carrying something like that?
For some reason, there was a collar and a chain in his hands.
“Pretty amazing, isn’t it? This is proof of my love for you. If you insist on running from me, I’ll have no other choice but to tie you down.”
This can’t be happening. What’s wrong with this psycho?!
Horrified, Noelle made a run for it. Much to her relief, Loic didn’t give chase.
“You’ll come crawling back to me soon,” he called after her. “You’ll see the truth. I can hardly wait.”
She had no idea what he was talking about, but alarm bells screamed in her head. This place was dangerous. She needed to escape.
He’s lost it. He’s completely bonkers! I have to do something, or who knows how this will end?!
She had no option but to turn to Lelia for help.

***

While Noelle faced trouble at the academy, the harbor was in chaos.
“Yahoo!”
Pierre piloted Arroganz alongside the ships as they filed in and out. He even raced them, zipping by at a breakneck speed. The ships rocked and swayed in the shock waves, and Pierre cackled at the confusion on the crews’ faces.
“This Armor is incredible! It may look like a piece of junk, but its power and speed are unmatched!”
“I am pleased to see you are enjoying it,” Luxion’s voice echoed inside the cockpit.
“Hey, One-Eye, are there better ways to have fun with this? What else can it do?”

Pierre had been testing Arroganz and the *Einhorn* since early that morning. He was in high spirits as he sped around the harbor.
“We have more important matters to attend to,” said Luxion. “Do you realize that the garrison is headed this way?”
“Those small fry won’t dare oppose me! I am the great Lord Pierre of House Feivel. Let them complain. I’ll rip them in half.”
“I believe I understand. Your authority exceeds that of these public agencies, correct?”
“Don’t ask obvious questions! You know, I *really* wanna take this thing into battle. Are there any enemies I can mess with?”
“I believe Holfort Kingdom would be the optimal choice.”
“What? You wanna kill your old master? You really are rotten to the core.”
“Perhaps.”
“Still, Holfort is a pretty big country. It’s the perfect chance to make a name for myself. Maybe I should send them a little gift…their prince’s head, perhaps?”
“You intend to provoke them into attacking you, is that it?”
“Sure,” Pierre gloated gleefully. “If we antagonize them enough, they’ll come after us, and we’ll make fools of them. As long as we’re under the Sacred Tree’s protection, there’s no way we’ll lose.”
“Now I understand,” said Luxion. “In that case, I believe there is a far better target than the prince.”
“Oh?”
“Leon Fou Bartfort. He is the Hero of Holfort. Taking his head will be a fine achievement, and one the kingdom will not stand for. Leon is engaged to the daughter of a duke. The royal family could not afford to let such an affront go unpunished.”
“Huh, not a bad idea. Sounds pretty entertaining. I get to kill the hero *and* take his woman.” Pierre’s twisted ambitions knew no bounds.
“Indeed. Leon is the perfect target.”
In this way, Luxion baited Pierre into going after his former master.

***

That morning, Marie went straight to the Holfort embassy to report the republic’s misdeeds, but the employees there were of little help.
“This is ridiculous. How dare they force us to endure such ill treatment! This is nothing short of tyranny, you hear me?!”
She needed to show Leon that she wasn’t standing idly by, and she hoped that her demands would force Holfort into taking action. Alas, she didn’t get the response that she expected.
“I am terribly sorry. I will see that this incident is reported to the kingdom, but I don’t think they’ll handle it the way you hope, Lady Marie.”
“And why not?! All I want is for Pierre to give back the *Einhorn*!” That would at least get Leon off her back. If she couldn’t return his ship, then

Leon’s fury would continue unabated—which meant that he would keep treating her like a stranger and calling her “Miss Marie.”
“The kingdom is buying a large number of Suspension Stones from the republic,” said the employee.
“Oh, yeah!”
Marie remembered the conversation she’d had before coming here. The Alzer Republic was a powerhouse when it came to exporting energy. Of course Holfort wanted to avoid any conflict with it. Not to mention their thus far spotless track record when it came to defending themselves—they were an especially fierce opponent.
“I will submit the report and make appeals on your behalf, but I don’t expect they will take action.”
Marie sniffed back her tears. “But why not?!”
Julius, who had tagged along, took over. “Isn’t there anything that can be done? This challenge was entirely underhanded.”
“I am sorry, Your Highness, but this is how things work in the republic. I never dreamed you would provoke House Feivel, of all families.”
“Is their reputation that bad?”
“The worst of the Six Great Houses.”
Marie was starting to panic. N-now what am I going to do? If I can’t figure something out quickly, my brother will abandon me!
Since protesting hadn’t done her any good, she had to contemplate her next course of action.

***

Lelia didn’t even try to hide her annoyance when her sister summoned her early the next morning. “Why do I have to skip first period for you?”
“Hey, I’m sorry, but this is beyond my ability to deal with. I want your help.”
The twins looked identical, but their personalities were almost polar opposites: where Noelle was forward and energetic, Lelia was laid-back and intellectual.
Lelia sighed and crossed her arms. “What have you done this time?”
“It wasn’t me! Pierre is trying to chase the exchange students out of school, and it looks like Loic has joined forces with them. He approached me this morning and started saying all these…terrifying things.” Noelle was still confused and shaken. She couldn’t quite articulate the details.
Lelia gave her a bored look. “I know about Pierre. And besides, isn’t it about time you got together with Loic?”
“I already told you, I *hate* him. Why did you have to instigate things between us?”
“Are you trying to pin that on me? You even *said* you didn’t hate him. All I did was give him some advice. Besides, what’s wrong with Loic? He’s handsome, *and* he’s the heir of one of the Six Great Houses.”

“I’m not so shallow that I would fall for someone because of their looks or their status!”
Noelle hadn’t hated Loic at first, but he’d been much nicer to her to begin with. All that had changed when Lelia started egging him on. He’d become controlling, and now he commented on everything Noelle did.
“Shallow?” Lelia scoffed. “What are you, a child? Are you going to whine to me about love now? Grow up.”
Noelle couldn’t believe it. “This isn’t about love—I *hate* him.”
“Fine, so be it. But don’t come shoving your problems onto my plate. I have my own issues to sort out.”
“S-sorry, but I actually think it’s really serious. Will you help me?” Noelle hugged herself. Her mind was still screaming ‘warning’ after her encounter with Loic.
Lelia narrowed her eyes. “If you just agreed to date him, it would solve everything. You could even help the exchange students out.”
She spun around to leave.
“Please listen to to me!” Noelle lunged forward and grabbed her sister’s arm, but Lelia shoved her off.
“Wah!”
Noelle landed on her butt, and Lelia glared down at her.
“You really are a nuisance. I told you, I’m busy. I’ll talk to Emile about Pierre, but you need to deal with Loic on your own.”
Noelle watched her sister march off and dropped her gaze to the floor.
“What am I supposed to do?”

***

That evening, I returned from grocery shopping to find a girl sitting outside my place.
Hey, this is a first. Wait, no it’s not.
I’d found Marie like this once, back in Japan. She’d wasted all her money playing around and hadn’t had any left for the train home. With no other choice, she’d waited outside my apartment to leech money off of me.
It was like a scene out of a horror film.
The girl’s hair was blonde, fading to pink at the ends. It was easy to guess her identity.
“What are you doing here so late?”
Noelle peered up at me. “Sorry, I just didn’t want to go back home.”
Her smile lacked its usual energy. Whatever had happened, she was putting on a brave face.
“Come on in,” I said.
“I’m sorry. I mean it, really. I know it’s an awful time for you.”
Sounded like she’d heard about our situation.
“What were things like at school?” I asked.

Noelle scratched her head and let out a strangled laugh. “Absolutely terrible.”
“Yeah?” I hauled my bags inside and set about tending to Elle.

***

Noelle stroked Elle’s head as she filled me in on the day’s events.
It seemed like we’d veered way off the script Marie had given me. Loic’s conversations with Noelle didn’t sound anything like what you’d expect to hear from a love interest in an otome game. Then there was Pierre, who had gone after *us* rather than the protagonist.
Even worse, Noelle had Loic chasing her, and Emile was protecting Lelia. At this point, it was still impossible to identify who the protagonist was.
I cleaned the table and set about writing a letter.
“What are you doing?” Noelle asked.
“Writing to the people back home. They’re getting antsy, demanding I send them a souvenir. And I need to update them on what’s happening.”
I needed to let that bastard, Roland, know that the republic was picking fights. I couldn’t wait to hear what expression he made when he realized.
While Noelle waited, I penned a few more letters.
“I’m sorry this is happening,” she said. “Especially when you came all this way to study.”
I shrugged. “It’s fine.”
I’d come here with my own agenda. I wanted to snuff out a danger that might threaten the world. There was no need for her to apologize.
“Are you guys going back to Holfort?” she asked.
“No. We have a reputation to uphold. I can’t go back until Pierre returns my ship.”
“You should give up on that. Once an oath is made to the Sacred Tree, it’s not easy to take it back.”
“You sure know a lot about this.”
Noelle looked flustered and tried to play it off. “A-a little, I guess.”
“I can’t just turn tail and run back home,” I told her. “Not with my status. Besides, the republic hasn’t apologized for its offenses. I need to make them pay.”
I was willing to let most things fly, but Pierre had completely crossed the line. Now I was just a *little* angry.
Noelle’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”
I nodded. “The only issue is figuring out how to lure Pierre into a match with me. If only there was some treasure that I could use to tempt him into challenging me in the public eye…”
Noelle shook her head in disbelief. “I heard the people of the kingdom were brave, but I can’t believe you’re thinking of challenging Pierre. You *do* realize he’s under divine protection, right?”
“That doesn’t really matter to me.”

The Alzer Republic thought it was invincible. Luxion and I had suspected their advantage all came down to the Sacred Tree, and knowing what I did now, I was convinced we were right.

“Either way, this plan will take time,” I said. “You can stay here however long you like.”

Noelle gaped at me. “Huh?”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to lay a hand on you. But you don’t feel comfortable going back home, right?”

“N-no, I don’t.”

She’d clearly had a fight with Lelia. Whatever the case, this house had plenty of spare rooms. She wouldn’t cause any problems, and it would actually be easier to keep an eye on her this way—especially now that I couldn’t rely on Luxion’s surveillance.

***

Several days later, the leaders of the Six Great Houses assembled in the Sacred Tree’s Temple, located in the former lands of House Lespinasse. Their subordinates handled the finer details, and the figureheads only discussed matters that required their approval. One of the more urgent topics was Pierre of House Feivel.

Albergue Sara Rault, the acting chairman, looked solemn as he read the report. Inwardly, he was filled with disgust. *House Feivel again? They never learn.*

So long as their opponent made the first move and invaded, the Alzer Republic could win any battle. Unfortunately, that had led to a history of some citizens deliberately antagonizing their neighbors.

And how long will people keep up this foolishness? Behind his outward indifference, Albergue was appalled.

Although he was in his mid-forties, he was tall and muscular and looked a decade younger. His hair was cropped short, and he wore a finely pressed suit. By all accounts, he was a handsome man for his age. “Lord Lambert,” he said. “Do you have any thoughts on the matter?”

House Feivel was at the center of this controversy, and the head of that household was Lambert Io Feivel. He was a short, plump man, and Albergue’s complete opposite. His hair was thinning noticeably, and he was so heavily adorned with rich clothes that it was a miracle he could still move.

“My son is a rowdy one, to be sure,” Lambert admitted. “But he simply wishes to demonstrate his prowess in battle. There are so few countries that try to invade now. What’s wrong with a bit of a tussle with Holfort?”

Fernand Tola Druille, leader of House Druille, didn’t agree. He was a capable, if inexperienced, leader. A handsome man with short, wavy green hair and green eyes. He was still in his early twenties, and the youngest of all those present. “He’s provoking conflict with other nations for personal

gain? It appears that he doesn’t understand what it means to be part of the aristocracy.”
Fernand’s reasoning was sound, but Lambert turned away in a huff. “Hah, greenhorn. If the thought of war makes you shake in your boots, you can stay home while the rest of us fight.”
The republic had been undefeated for so long that many of its citizens had grown desensitized to the thought of war. Each victory only made them more conceited.
The other leaders had their own views, but none of them considered this matter particularly urgent or noteworthy.
“Shouldn’t we be more concerned that we have yet to obtain a Precious Orb this year?”
“Indeed. The matter of Holfort Kingdom isn’t even worth discussing.”
“Just apologize, offer them some remuneration, and be done with it. If they still insist on complaining, then battle will shut them up soon enough.”
The other lords were eager to move things along, but Albergue’s gaze fell on a name in the report.
“Leon, hm?”
“Is something the matter, Chairman?” Fernand asked.
“It’s nothing. More importantly, I must also request that the stolen ship be returned. Surely you have no qualms about that, Lord Lambert?”
It was a simple request. Losing one ship seemed inconsequential. Yet Lambert was visibly shaken. “N-no, I can’t abide by that. My son took it in a fair match—they swore by the Sacred Tree. It is rightfully his!”
Albergue and Fernand raised their eyebrows, but the other high lords showed no interest.
“Chairman, we don’t have all day,” urged Loic’s father, head of House Barielle. “I must ask that we move on.”
Albergue acquiesced. *I suppose it would do us no good to continue to speak about this.* He shook his head. “In that case, let us speak about these Precious Orbs. As has just been noted, we have yet to procure…”
And so, the matter of the Holfort Kingdom was quietly swept under the rug.

Chapter 7:
The Descendants of Adventurers

WHEN LEON'S PACKAGE arrived at Holfort Academy, Angie and Livia were there to receive it.

"I wondered why we hadn't heard from him in so long," Angie said. "He actually sent us souvenirs."

She opened the box happily to find tea leaves and other products young ladies might find appealing. There were also letters tucked inside. Livia read the one addressed to them.

"Angie!" she exclaimed. "It looks like Mr. Leon has gotten himself into some trouble. And he wants us to deliver letters to the king and queen."

"What?"

Angie scanned the letter herself. There were a few words of love at the top, but after that, Leon spoke solely of the problems in the republic. He'd asked them to deliver a couple of letters to Roland and Mylene on his behalf, hoping they would help to sort it out.



Angie turned to Cleare, hovering forlornly in the middle of the room.
"I see he didn't send me anything," sniffed the robot. "I can't believe it. After all the hard work I've done."
"Cleare, had you heard about this already? Weren't you in charge of exchanging letters between us?"
"Luxion went silent, so I don't know what's going on. I assume there was a problem."
Angie pressed her hand over her lips. "What could have happened? And why would he send several letters like this? It troubles me that he didn't give us any details."
Livia plucked out the letters intended for the king and queen, looking anxious. "Should we take a peek?"
"As much as I would like to, Leon must have his reasons for preparing separate letters. We should take them to Their Majesties right away."
Cleare spun in circles. "Hmm, I'm skeptical. Knowing Master, I doubt there's a deeper meaning. The letter for Roland is probably just an offensive nastygram, while the letter for Mylene is probably a love note. Or at least his best attempt."
Livia's face went blank. She glanced between the letters. "I think that would be a bit inappropriate."
Angie chuckled. "He's already engaged to us. You really think he has the courage to pen a love letter to Her Majesty *and* make us deliver it? If he had the guts to do something so stupid, I'd almost admire him for it."
She might have been laughing, but there was nothing amusing about this situation.
"Yeah, I'm sure that good-for-nothing wouldn't have the nerve to pull it off," Cleare added, sensing the tension. "Anyway, if there's something going on, maybe we should make some preparations?"
"What do you mean?" Livia asked.
"Bet you're curious, huh?" Cleare responded gleefully. "After the *Einhorn*'s construction, there were a lot of spare parts left over. Luxion kept them for maintenance, but we can use those to build a second ship. Since it'll basically be *Einhorn* 2.0, I think we should call it the *Licorne*. We've collected some interesting equipment that I'd like to try out as well."
"Uh, okay."
Livia ended the conversation on an awkward note, unable to keep up with Cleare's passionate rambling. She and Angie took the two letters that Leon had entrusted to them.
"Let's get these delivered quickly," said Angie. "…And hope that nothing bad happens to Leon in the meantime."

***

My package should be arriving in the kingdom around now…

Meanwhile, I had taken an extended break from school. I had no interest in showing up to be bullied, and no one complained about my lack of attendance.
Instead, I went to Marie's estate to speak with Brad.
"Apologies," he said. "I understand I've caused you a great deal of trouble."
"Your injuries were pretty serious," I said. "But you seem to be healing up quickly."
"Marie has used her healing magic on me every night. I feel a little guilty, but it's a nice perk."
I frowned. "I'm not interested in hearing about your love life."
"Oh? That's unfortunate."
If he was bragging, then obviously his condition wasn't too serious—although his wounds still looked pretty gruesome. Marie had told me that his initial condition had been pretty damn severe. If he'd been any worse off, she wouldn't have been able to heal him with magic.
Pierre and his flunkies really hadn't held back.
Unsurprisingly, that was what I'd come to discuss. "Brad, the guys who hurt you, were they pretty strong?"
Brad pulled a face. "Honestly, they were pushovers. I even had the advantage in melee, and their magic was clumsy. Amateurish. I thought I couldn't lose."
That was really saying something. Brad was terrible in close combat—even worse than me. If these guys were weaker than Brad, that made me question the actual strength of the republic's nobility.
"They started using magic, so I responded in kind. But at some point, my spells stopped working."
"Stopped working? You mean you couldn't cast them properly?"
"No, it was like the spell stopped…*responding*. It just disappeared. I had no problem calling on mana, but it felt like something, somewhere, was cutting me off. And Pierre's magic was insanely powerful. He conjured these roots from the ground and manipulated them at will. Only a very skilled mage could accomplish such a thing, but I don't think he possesses that level of power. It was so strange."
My guess was Brad didn't know about the protections the Sacred Tree could afford.
"Gotcha. Well, thanks for the info." I stood and turned to leave. "You should focus on healing up."
"Bartfort," Brad called after me. "Are you scheming?"
"What makes you think that?"
"You don't take this sort of thing lying down. If you are planning something, then you should know: Those guys have something else up their sleeve, I'm sure of it."
"I'll be careful. You just hurry up and get better."
I stepped out of his room and found Marie waiting for me in the hallway, a notebook clutched to her chest.

***

Marie held her notebook out toward me. There were dark circles under her eyes. She had clearly pulled an all-nighter.

"I-I wrote down everything I can remember," she blurted out. She kept her head down, refusing to meet my gaze.

Part of me wanted to chastise her for not putting in the effort to do that *before* we got here, but a quick perusal of the notebook revealed some interesting tidbits. "Looks like you actually worked hard at this."

"I did!" she said eagerly.

She wasn't just blowing smoke up my ass either. There was some good information in here, like how an oath to the Sacred Tree allowed a crest-bearer to draw even more energy from it. That must be how Pierre had beaten Brad so easily.

There was also stuff about the crests themselves. The strongest ones were bestowed on the Guardian and the Priestess, followed by the ones given to the Six Great Houses. It went on to describe the ones given to the other nobles and how a person's status was dictated by their crest. Nobles were only nobles here because of the Sacred Tree's blessing. It was easy enough to follow.

"This is pretty good information." Some of it would prove quite useful in reaping my revenge on Pierre.

"Um, what are you going to do, Big Bro?" Marie asked, fidgeting.

She was walking on eggshells. It seemed my teasing had gone a bit overboard. I smiled, hoping to relieve her anxiety. "That should be pretty obvious. I'm going to get even with Pierre. And I'll make sure the Alzer Republic learns its place. They can't keep acting like this."

Especially because we couldn't go home yet. Not while we still hadn't dealt with the world-ending danger of the sequel.

I'd been trying to reassure Marie, but instead she teared up and started trembling violently. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she babbled.

Where's this coming from?!

Julius rushed over, having spotted us. "Marie! Are you all right?!"

I pulled a face, knee-jerk disgusted with him. "There he is, our idiot prince."

Julius threw an arm in front of Marie, trying to shield her from me.

"Bartfort, I understand I am partially responsible for this mess, but please stop putting so much stress on Marie! If you have something to say, say it to me!"

Oh, yes. How *swoon-worthy*. If I were a girl, he'd probably have swept me right off my—yeah, no way in hell.

"Really?" I asked. "Then how about I put you to work?"

"Wh-what?"

Jilk peeked into the hallway. "Your Highness! Marie! I'm glad to see you're all right."

“Perfect.” I jerked my thumb at him. “Green can tag along too.”
“Pardon?” Hearing the noise, Chris poked his head out into the hall as well. He must have been practicing again, because he was naked from the waist up and covered in sweat. “What in the world is going on here?”
I peered at him, debating whether he or Greg would be the better pick. Ultimately, Greg wasn’t here, so that made the decision for me.
“Okay, Blue, you’ll be coming too. Marie, I’m taking these three with me.”
“What are you going on about?!” Julius snapped.
Marie nodded, unconcerned by my demands. “That’s fine. What are you going to do?”
The boys gaped at her. “Uh, Marie?!”
I ignored them, rolling the notebook up and smacking my shoulder. “We’re going to raid the republic’s dungeon and get our hands on some treasure.”
Marie’s eyes lit up. “Treasure!”
Julius and the others were just as excited. They were pathetic, sure, but they were still the descendants of adventurers. The word “treasure” was more than enough to get their blood pumping.
“I have no idea what’s going on, but I cannot ignore such talk.”
“Your Highness, we should prepare to depart!” Jilk had completely changed his tune. He was just as excited as the others.
Even Chris was acting like a child on a field trip. “I brought a sword for just such an occasion. I shall fetch it at once. Bartfort, when do we leave?”
I wish I shared their enthusiasm. I snorted. “Give me some time. I need to go lay the groundwork at the academy and secure us a guide.”
Marie tilted her head. “A guide?”
“Right. There’s a professor who knows a lot about the dungeons here, remember?”

***

It had been a while since I’d set foot in the academy. Everyone gawked at me, even the teachers. At least, until they came to their senses and averted their eyes. Just went to show how the Six Great Houses held sway over everyone else.
I strolled down the middle of the hallway. Everyone was so anxious to avoid me that they scrambled out of the way.
Hey, this isn’t half-bad actually.
“Now to find Professor Narcisse.”
He was the reason I’d come. Narcisse was the only member of the faculty who was also a love interest. His field was dungeons and ruins, so his classes emphasized fieldwork. The course was a special elective, so Narcisse was more of a researcher than an actual professor.
Although he aspired to be an archaeologist, Narcisse was actually a descendant of one of the Great Houses. Consequently, he didn’t have as

much freedom as he might have liked. In the original game, he helped the protagonist using his skills.

So why shouldn't he help us too?

As I headed to his classroom, I bumped into Miss Louise.

"Leon?!" she gasped.

I waved. "Heya, it's been a while. Mostly 'cause Pierre kinda stole my ship." I tried to downplay the severity of the matter, but her eyes narrowed.

"Come with me." She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into an empty classroom. "Tell me exactly what happened. I wanted to ask sooner, but none of you have shown up for school. Even Noelle refuses to attend. I can only assume this has something to do with her."

I tried to keep it simple. "That piece of shit Pierre tricked the others into making an oath with the Sacred Tree and swiped my ship. As for Noelle, Loic cornered her with a collar and started on his spiel about wanting her all for himself. She's staying at my place for her own protection."

Louise relaxed. "Now I understand. I will speak with my father. You can leave Pierre and Loic to me."

Sure didn't expect the villainess to have such a compassionate side. I shook my head. "It's not that simple. We'll just end up looking like fools. I *am* the Hero of Holfort, you know. Brad, the guy Pierre injured, is the former heir of a noble house. And Pierre left marks on everyone's necks too, including the former crown prince."

Honestly, thinking about that collar-like engraving on Marie's neck made my blood boil.

Miss Louise's expression tensed. "I understand, but Pierre is a descendant of one of the Six Great Houses. You cannot win against him."

All right, I admit, I might have been listing the reasons why I couldn't let this go, but none of those were my *real* reason for going after him. "Let me put it this way," I said. "He picked a fight with me, and I'm going to get even. He'll regret having ever messed with me. Now, would you mind pitching in?"

Hopeless as it was, it was worth asking.

Louise hesitated for a moment, and then, much to my surprise…

"All right, but I would like you to refrain from doing anything too risky."

"It might not look like it, but I'm pretty good in a fight."

"I will take your word for it. Now, what would you ask of me?"

"I'd like you to introduce me to someone. Also…"

When Louise heard my second request, her jaw dropped.

***

Miss Louise guided me to a building with specialized classrooms. Eventually, we found Narcisse Calce Granze lounging on a sofa in one of the prep rooms. The whole place was buried in documents, with no clear way through.

Exasperated at the state of it, Miss Louise banged on the open door to rouse him.
“Won’t you please get up, Professor Narcisse?”
He shot upright at the noise. Narcisse had ashen gray hair that fell loosely down his back, and his face was stubbled. Stains covered his threadbare shirt but, underneath the shabby clothing, he was tall, even slender and toned. Exhaustion lined his face, but he still looked plenty handsome.
Narcisse reached for his glasses on the coffee table and then turned his gaze toward us. “Ah, if it isn’t Louise. Rare to see you here.”
Seemed like the two of them were acquainted.
“I brought a guest.”
“A guest. For me?”
“A pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I am Leon, one of the exchange students. Actually, I came here hoping to talk about dungeons—”
Before I could finish my sentence, Narcisse leaped to his feet and threw his arms around me. “I’ve been waiting for you, adventurer!”
“Uh, what?”
I was so confused. As he hugged me, the cloying stench of alcohol flooded my nose. Miss Louise was kind enough to help me pry him off.
“Narcisse, what is the meaning of this?!” She had given up referring to him as a professor, but he didn’t seem to mind.
“Oh, sorry about that. I’ve just been looking forward to this day, ever since I heard there would be exchange students this year. Students in Holfort are also adventurers, aren’t they? If you decide to explore one of our dungeons, I’m sure you’ll accomplish great things.”
Jeez, he sure had passion for his hobbies.
“You’re not busy with anything else right now, are you?” I asked.
“Hm? Well, I suppose not. I’ve only just returned from exploring some ruins. I figured the academy would scold me if I didn’t come back to teach soon.”
“You know that no one enrolled in your class this year, right?”
“Really? Well, that’s not good. My salary from the school is the only way I can fund my archaeological exploits.”
He sure is lackadaisical. And he doesn’t seem to know anything about the situation at the school.
“Anyway, Professor,” I said. “Would you listen to what I have to say?”
“Oh, just a moment. I’ll prepare some tea. I think I left my tea set over here…” He stumbled over something, and an avalanche of documents fell on top of him. “Pl-please save me.”
I glanced over at Miss Louise. “Are you sure he’s from one of the Six Great Houses?”
“That’s right. Narcisse the Eccentric. The younger generation might make light of him, but I hear he’s an exceptional scholar.”
I glanced at the mound of papers he was buried under. It wasn’t hard to see why they thought this guy was a weirdo. Exasperated, the two of us set about digging him out.

***

Once we'd excavated the professor, I explained the situation. When I told him about our conflict with Pierre, he seemed genuinely apologetic.
"I don't quite know what to say. It's terrible. Allow me to apologize on behalf of the Great Houses."
"Why didn't you guys do something about Pierre sooner? From what I've heard, he's been a problem for a while."
Narcisse frowned. "Calling us the Six Great Houses makes us sound like a collective, but in fact, each family is more like royalty in their respective regions. That may seem unimportant, but if I were to reprimand Pierre, his family would interpret it as outside political interference."
The republic was basically like a collection of countries united under the Sacred Tree. Perhaps this kind of problem was inevitable.
Whatever, none of that has anything to do with me.
"I'll deal with Pierre," I said. "Now, how about that favor I asked?"
"You mean clearing out the dungeon in the Lespinasse Region? I'd be delighted, but it's quite dangerous. The closer you get to the Sacred Tree, the tougher the dungeons are. And the dungeon in Lespinasse is practically at the base."
"Not a problem."
"I still wish you would refrain from doing anything so obviously dangerous," Miss Louise interjected. "You do seem pretty confident, but it's not good to overestimate your abilities."
Ah, if only this woman were my older sister instead of that jerk.
Jenna and Finley wouldn't have worried for my safety. If anything, they would just demand I bring something back for them. Tears welled in my eyes.
"Wh-what's wrong, Leon? Why are you crying?"
"I'm just touched. Not often a girl says something so kind."
I had Angie and Livia now, but my first year in Holfort Academy had been miserable. Nothing short of torture.
I wiped my tears away with my sleeve. "So, Professor Narcisse, will you guide us?"
He crossed his arms and thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "All right. I will be your guide. However, I want the remuneration you promised. I *am* running out of funds for my research, after all."
"Don't worry. I'll pay you everything you're owed. Republic dungeons have a reputation for being full of treasure. I'm looking forward to this."
That wasn't a lie—I really was excited. This would be a good opportunity to get my hands on magic stones and other valuable resources. I was going to work the idiot squad to the bone.
"In that case, shall we set off immediately?" I asked.
"Pardon?"

I grinned and grabbed the professor by the arm, dragging him out of the room. Miss Louise stared blankly after us.
"When I get back, I hope you'll help me out," I called back to her.
"Y-yes, of course."
A thin smile crept onto my face. Pierre, you are going to regret the day you ever crossed me.

***

A number of lovers were enjoying their lunch break in the school courtyard, including Lelia and Emile. It was nevertheless obvious from the expression on Lelia's face that her mind was elsewhere.
Where could Noelle have gone? Her older sister had yet to return home. She was worried for her, but she was also annoyed. Why is she hesitating? She should hook up with Loic and be done with it.
Emile could see she was distracted. "What is it, Lelia?" he asked, concerned. "Has Miss Noelle still not come back?"
She flashed him a smile. "Um, no, not yet. I'm sure it'll be fine. I just wish she would contact me."
Emile frowned. "I *have* heard some disturbing things lately. I know Loic has feelings for Miss Noelle, but I hope that Pierre doesn't do anything cruel to her."
"Yeah. My sister is really stubborn. If she'd just quit playing games and agreed to go out with Loic, all of this would be solved."
Lelia was doing her best to hook them up, and to that end, she had given Loic all kinds of advice.
"Don't you think Loic's behavior has been a bit strange lately?" Emile asked. "The atmosphere around him is kind of…terrifying."
He recognized the danger that Loic posed, but Lelia wouldn't have it.
"Seriously? I think he's just panicking because things aren't going his way. He's not that scary, he's just a little possessive."
Emile pulled a face. "If he's just a *little* possessive, then I suppose it's not my place to say anything, hm?" He peeled his gaze away from Lelia, only to notice Leon dragging Narcisse across the courtyard. "That's unusual. The exchange students haven't been here for a while. I wonder where he's taking Professor Narcisse?"
Lelia's eyes went wide with surprise as she stared at Leon. She even dropped the bread she was eating, although she was too preoccupied with her thoughts to realize. "Is he…?"

***

We boarded a small airship and set sail for the Lespinasse dungeon. When we reached it, there was a sign outside forbidding entry, but we pushed it aside. Thanks to Narcisse, we already had permission for our little venture.

All we had to do was mention he was a member of the Six Great Houses, and we were free to go in.
“What great weather,” exclaimed Julius. “The perfect day for an adventure!”
“Yes, Your Highness!” Jilk eagerly agreed, checking the rifle on his back.
Narcisse adjusted the straps of his rucksack and gazed up at the sky. “No, it’s cloudy today.”
Julius grinned. “It’s a matter of perspective, Professor.”
“Uh, no. I don’t think the weather has anything to do with perspective!”
These guys were really enjoying themselves.
Chris had brought several different swords and was trying to decide which he should take inside. “Maybe I should go with this one? But this one’s not bad either… Oh, forget it! I’ll just take both!”
I think these guys are mistaking this dungeon exploration for a picnic. Why couldn’t they just put themselves in my shoes for once? You know, as the high commander of huge morons.
“If you’re finished?” I said. “Let’s get a move on.”
I had a portable terminal with me that resembled a smartphone. I used it to pull up a map of the area. Static raced across the screen. Interference caused by the Sacred Tree, maybe?
Professor Narcisse peeked over my shoulder. “Oh? The kingdom sure does employ some curious tools.”
“Oh, this? It’s a Lost Item. Pretty handy. I thought I’d make some use of it.”
“A Lost Item?! That *is* incredible. I would love to take a closer look, if you don’t mind.”
“If by ‘closer look’ you mean disassembling it, then no. I’d like to keep it in one piece.” I slung a heavy bag and shotgun over my shoulder. “Now let’s head inside.”
Narcisse frowned. “Leon, mind telling me why you brought explosives?”
I tilted my head. “Isn’t that obvious? Because we’ll need them.”
“I am knowledgeable enough about gunpowder,” Jilk assured him. “You needn’t worry. We’ll make sure none of the treasure is harmed.”
“That’s not the problem. There are ruins in this dungeon! You can’t just go blowing the place up!”
Julius laughed. “Don’t worry. We’ll do our best not to destroy anything. After all, damaging the treasure would hurt its value.”
“I hope you mean its *historical* value! Do you boys understand the importance of these ruins?”
I chuckled. “I’ve got this. If the others get out of hand, I’ll step in. Besides, our objective isn’t the ruins. We’re looking for something else.”
That “something else” was a key item that would normally have no effect. Besides moving the game’s story along, it was practically useless. However, this wasn’t a game anymore. And that meant this item would be *extremely* useful.
Narcisse frowned. “Something else you say?”

I ignored his questioning look and kept walking. “Time to get down to business! Keep your wits about you, chumps!”

Julius, Jilk, and Chris crowed with excitement.

“That does not inspire confidence,” Narcisse mumbled, hanging his head.

Chapter 8:
The Sacred Tree's Sapling

BACK IN THE PALACE in Holfort, King Roland leisurely sipped his tea. "It tastes even better when everyone else is loaded down with work."

Light from a nearby window spilled over him, and despite his despicable words, he was smiling brightly.

Mylene had come to meet with him. Like everyone else in the palace, she had been working herself to the bone since the end of the war. "You are as irredeemable as ever, I see."

Roland shook his head mournfully. "I shall say nothing to defend myself. Truly, it wounds me that I cannot be of more assistance. By the way, did you finish everything yet?"

As "wounded" as he claimed to be, he was inwardly delighted. He really did have a twisted personality. Not only did he loathe Leon, he was happy to punch down as much as his position allowed.

"Leon sent me a letter," said Mylene. "It seems to be urgent. Angie delivered it to me personally. There's one for you as well."

"That brat sent me something? No doubt he's filled it with disparaging remarks. I have no interest in reading it. You can give me a summary. Oh, but do tell me about any insults. I'll be sure to send him to the gallows this time."

His "joke" earned him a cold glare from Mylene. "Perhaps it will be *you* going to the gallows instead."

"Oh, don't worry. That brat is too softhearted. He doesn't have the guts to execute me." Perhaps the fact that Roland understood Leon so well was proof of how alike they were.

"You're incorrigible." Mylene shook her head and opened the envelope. As she scanned the contents, her expression turned grim.

"Well?" Roland asked. "I am sure it's all nonsense. No doubt he's drowning in free time. Enough that he could waste some of it to write a belittling letter."

But Mylene soon gave him a harsh wake up call. "It says you're in a dispute with one of the Six Great Houses—the Feivel family."

"I'm what?!" Roland leaped from his chair, spilling tea everywhere. He hissed in pain and then tore the letter from Mylene's hand to check for himself.

Dearest King Roland,

You haven't fallen ill, have you? I must say that I am in perfect health, but I pray daily that yours fails you. Pleasantries aside, I'll get to the heart of why I'm writing: House Feivel's second son, Pierre, picked a fight with me. I

think I'll return the favor. This will surely cause political issues, so I'm counting on you to handle the fallout.

Roland's hands trembled. "That worthless, good-for-nothing braaaaat! How dare he do this to meeee!"
But that wasn't the end of Leon's correspondence.

PS: Remember how you said to "deal with these troublemakers" in your letter? Well, I'm going to deal with all of them—the republic included. Good luck dealing with the aftermath! Bwa ha ha ha!

Yours Truly,
A servant who is far too good for the likes of you.

Roland tore the paper to pieces. "That absolute scumbag! I really will send him to the gallows! Mylene, gather the most prominent members of the nobility, quickly! We must send someone to the republic to investigate. This will be an absolute nightmare if we don't stop that maniac from—hey, why are you blushing?"
"Huh?" Mylene's cheeks were a bright red. She quickly hid the letter that Leon had sent her behind her back and looked away, embarrassed. "N-nothing. It's a secret."
Roland wrinkled his nose. "A secret? You make it sound cute, but do you realize how old you are? Augh!"
His insensitive remark had earned him a slap across the face.

***

We're finally in an Alzer dungeon!
This cave was truly bizarre. Moss grew over the floor and walls, and light flooded in through a hole in the ceiling. The place was set up almost like a labyrinth, with wild plants growing everywhere. I'd never seen anything like it.
"Here they come. Three hundred meters in front of us. Six of them!" I shoved the portable terminal into my pocket and reached for my shotgun.
Jilk was in front of me. "I'll take the first shot."
He aimed his rifle and blasted the monsters rushing toward us. Empty ammunition shells fell to the ground as he reloaded. He peered through the scope, found his next mark, and fired again.
"Hey, Jilk, leave some for the rest of us!"
Julius raced forward with Chris hot on his heels.
"Your Highness, please allow me! You should stay back where it's safe."
Our enemies kept coming. Some scuttled across the walls and ceiling like centipedes. I changed my position to get a clean line of fire and kept watch over the battlefield. One of the monsters launched itself from the ceiling,

and Julius cut it down in midair. It collapsed to the floor, turned to black smoke, and vanished. In the meantime, Chris took care of three others.

These guys are getting more and more powerful. It's ridiculous.

"Okay. Looks like we're safe for now. Let's take a small break." I pulled my tablet back out and checked the map. We were still quite far from our objective.

Professor Narcisse clapped his hands. "Wow, that was incredible. I heard that Holfort's adventurers were the real deal, but you guys are even stronger than I imagined. Those monsters were quite powerful, and you annihilated them."

"That was nothing," Julius said. He puffed out his chest, despite only having downed a single opponent. "We could take out ten or even twenty of those beasts."

If I saw that many coming, I'd head for the hills. I nodded. "Great. You fight them, I'll run."

"You truly are contemptible, Bartfort."

"What moron would try to fight *twenty* of those things? Obviously you'd be better off setting a trap and luring them in."

Narcisse slumped. "Please don't set traps in here. This place contains some very precious ruins. And, most importantly, we're close to the Sacred Tree."

As we delved deeper, we kept running into the tree's roots. Some were so massive that they obscured the walls. Others were less noticeable—you'd think you were walking on a normal floor only to discover it was part of the tree. This dungeon sure was incredible.

Julius's eyes brightened. "Precious ruins, you say? Hey, Bartfort, can we take a look?"

A strange light gleamed on Chris's glasses. "Greg sure was unlucky to be left behind."

"Yes, although he *does* get to spend more time alone with Miss Marie," Jilk said, sulking.

I still have no idea why they find her so appealing.

"Ah, I do so admire the young people of Holfort," said Narcisse, moved by our conversation. "Not only are you skilled adventurers, you have an interest in archaeology too. What good company you are in a dungeon like this."

I…think we have a misunderstanding here. I winced. "You really think these guys are interested in archaeology?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Pretty much. They're all barbarians. Myself excluded, of course."

Julius glared at me. "Slander!"

"Really? Julius, if you knew there was a treasure somewhere, but you encountered a sealed door on your way, what would you do? Notably, this door is a part of the ruins and has historical value."

"That's simple: I'd blast it open and swipe the treasure!"

Narcisse shrieked. "Wait! He just said the door is *part* of the ruins!"

Jilk laughed. "Please don't worry. We would place our explosives strategically. We'd blow up the door and leave the rest of the structure intact."
"You shouldn't even be using explosives to begin with!"
Chris shook his head, as though he were somehow better than the other bozos. "His Highness and Jilk are too extreme. You need only destroy the lock, then you could just open it."
Professor Narcisse finally ran out of patience. "You shouldn't be destroying *anything*! Treasure provides us with valuable *data*. Why are you so intent on stealing it?!"
The three of them gasped in shock.
I sniffed. "Now do you get it? Like I said, they're barbarians."
"Then what would *you* do, Earl Bartfort?" Jilk asked.
"Well, not that, obviously."
Narcisse nodded, relieved. "I am relieved that you have a better understanding of this, Leon."
"I wouldn't even need to destroy the door. I'd steal the treasure, and I wouldn't even leave any evidence that I'd ever been there."
Julius, Jilk, and Chris all chuckled.
"Well, you've got us there!"
"Yes, I must admit."
"Indeed, that is the best way to handle it."
Honestly, these morons are exasperating. I paused. "Hm? Professor Narcisse, what's wrong? Why are you holding your head in your hands?"
"Leon," he mumbled. "Your answer was the absolute worst."
Huh. Really? I tilted my head in bemusement.
Julius shook his head. "Bartfort, you're the most terrible barbarian of all. Or perhaps just the most reckless."
"Why's that?"
"No one else would enter a dungeon *alone* to retrieve Lost Items," Jilk snickered.
Professor Narcisse's head shot up. "Lost Items, you say? So you possess others?!"
Chris folded his arms and nodded. "Yes, I remember the *Partner*. She was a fine ship."
"Pardon? Um, hold on a second. What happened exactly?"
"It went down during the war," Chris explained.
"Wh-why would you use something as precious as a Lost Item during a war?!" Narcisse howled. "Do you not understand how important they are for archaeological research? And why aren't you more shaken up about it? Leon! I demand a detailed explanation!"
As he lamented what he called a devastating loss for humanity, I bit my tongue. While I had retrieved the *Partner* in the aftermath of the war, I couldn't very well tell the professor that. After all, the ship had lost all archaeological value when we completely rebuilt her.

Instead, I just laughed awkwardly and tried to change the subject. “So anyway, break’s over. Let’s get going.”
“I changed my mind,” said Narcisse. “You Holfortians *are* brutes.”
Hah. I don’t want to hear that from an Alzerian.

***

While Leon and the others were in the dungeon, Marie and Greg went to the library. Greg had been left behind to serve as Marie’s bodyguard, but he wasn’t happy about missing the opportunity to explore a dungeon with the others.
He sighed. “I wish I coulda gone with them. Why was I the only one left out? Bartfort coulda let me tag along too.”
The library was silent, save for the sound of Marie flipping through a book. She turned toward Greg. “Hey, what does this mean?”
She was perusing Alzerian tomes and had to stop to look up words she didn’t recognize. But some of it was highly technical jargon, and the standard dictionary wasn’t of much use. Greg, on the other hand, was the former heir of a great noble house. As such, he’d received quality education and was quite fluent in Alzerian.
“Oh, this?” He translated it for her.
“Thanks.”
“Aren’t you going to take a break?” he asked. “Carla’s worried about you. She said you haven’t been sleepin’ much.”
Marie turned away and buried her nose back in the book. She seemed to have no interest in rest. “I still haven’t done enough,” she insisted. “There’s so much more I need to find out.”
Ever since Brad had been injured, she had really stepped up. Greg had seen how hard she was working.
Sulking isn’t going to get me anywhere, he decided. I’d better pitch in. For Marie’s sake, and to avenge Brad.
And so, Greg began pouring some genuine effort into helping.

***

We followed the route on my terminal and found ourselves at the bottom of what looked like a cliff. A tree root blocked our path, but it was so massive that you had to crane your neck to get a good look. It wouldn’t be easy to climb such a thing.
“We should take another route,” said Narcisse.
If we did that, it would only cost us more time. I glanced at Chris, who seemed to understand immediately.
“I guess this is where I come in.” He set his things aside and pulled a rope out of his rucksack. “Back in a moment.”
“Good luck!” I called after him.

Chris grinned and began scaling the cliff.
By now, Professor Narcisse was well past being surprised. Instead, he was exasperated. “There really is no limit to what you boys can do.”
Julius lifted his chin. “This is considered an essential skill in Holfort. Even Bartfort could do it.”
Okay, you trash-tier prince, why use me as an example? Whatever. I glanced at Narccisus. “The students here can’t climb?”
“Our curriculum is different, so it’s impossible to compare. That said, our students aren’t nearly as fit as yours. There are only a few who could keep up on a real delve.”
While we were chatting, Chris made it to the top. He waved down at us. Seemed it was safe to follow.
“All right, time to get climbing.”
We would be much closer to our goal when he got to the top. Even so, this key item was supposed to be a pain to retrieve.
“There sure are a lot of monsters,” I mumbled, staring down at my tablet.
Jilk peeked over. “You can tell where they are with that thing? When did you get that, anyway?”
“Fairly recently, in fact.”
“You don’t say. And what about that small ship we used to get here? When did you get that?”
“It was stored aboard the *Einhorn*, but I used it recently and never returned it. Good thing too, or we wouldn’t have had a ride.” I kept my answers vague as I surveyed the map for convenient locations. “All right, time to lay down some traps.”
“So, you *are* going to use traps?” Narcisse asked, looking resigned. “Please retrieve them after you’re done, at least.”
We needed to find somewhere to bottleneck these creatures so we could pick them off easily. Setting up traps in strategic locations would also thin their numbers. These sorts of underhanded schemes were Jilk’s forte.
“Why do I get the impression you’re nursing libelous thoughts about me?” Jilk asked, glaring daggers as we set about placing the traps.
I wasn’t about to play nice. I’d been on the receiving end of his cunning before. “I was just thinking that this kind of work fits your nasty personality. You know, considering how masterfully you used my sister to plant explosives on my Armor.”
“Ugh! I can say nothing in my defense.”
“Whatever. Just get to work.”
Now we just needed someone to act as bait…
I clapped Julius on the shoulder. “You are the only one I can entrust with this task.”
“I see you have finally recognized my skills, Bartfort. Very well. Whatever it is, just say the word. It will be done.”
Glad to hear it. You’re finally going to be of some use to me, Julius.

***

“Baaartfooooort! I’ll remember this, I swear!”

Julius charged through the dungeon, firing his pistol behind him. One of his shots blasted through a monster’s skull, turning it to dust. However, there were over a hundred of them on his tail, so it was almost impossible for him to miss.

Julius flew toward the rendezvous point at full speed, although he had to be careful with the moss-covered ground and the roots that wove across his path. As he ran, he conjured an image of Leon’s face in his mind.

“I knew it. I was a fool to trust him!”

It had never occurred to Julius that Leon intended to use him as bait.

Finally, he arrived at the rendezvous point.

“Your Highness!” Jilk hollered. “Keep running!”

There was an enormous caterpillar right behind Julius, but Jilk turned it to ash with his rifle. Julius followed his friend’s instructions and dashed past. Leon was waiting just ahead.

“Great work, Your Highness.” Leon lifted his shotgun. A magic circle hovered in front of the barrel. When Julius charged by, Leon pulled the trigger. “Eat this!”

The scattershot pierced the magic circle, imbuing each pellet with electricity. They glowed as they hurtled toward the monsters, which disappeared in puffs of smoke.

Julius collapsed on his rear, gasping for air. He craned his neck to look at Leon. “Th-that’s incredibly complex magic, isn’t it? When did you learn to use that, Bartfort?”

Leon didn’t bother looking back. “I just made an effort to learn whatever magic might be beneficial. Although this is the only spell I can really use.”

Julius was impressed. Of their group, the only other one who could use magic on that level was Brad. *Maybe Bartfort really* is *better than the rest of us. At least when he puts his mind to it.*

Leon’s disinterest was probably why his grades were so average. If he actually put in the effort, he would likely be in the same league as Julius and his friends, academically. Perhaps he’d be even better.

Julius wiped the sweat from his face and pulled himself back to his feet. No, Bartfort is less interested in power than he is in fulfilling his goals.

Leon had gone into a dungeon by himself and claimed the Lost Items inside. He had also participated in the war, helping Holfort claim victory. As far as Julius was concerned, what made Leon so incredible wasn’t his ability in itself but his dedication to getting results.

He only puts in as much effort as needed. As soon as Julius thought that, the clearing behind him erupted with a succession of explosions. Smoke gusted toward them, obscuring everything.

“Okay, we’re done with the appetizer,” Leon called out. “Now for the main course.”

***

We arrived at our objective to find a spacious area, the sunlight pouring in through a large hole in the ceiling. Lumps of magic stone and metal protruded from the ground. It looked like something from a dream.

Deeper in, a gigantic beast loomed, its fur gleaming in the light. It was a mishmash of numerous animals—with huge horns jutting from its head, the nose of an elephant, a hairy body, a reptilian tail, and sharp claws.

Professor Narcisse shrieked. “It’s a Chimera Beast! Why is something so dangerous here? D-don’t tell me… This place is strange—it’s infested with monsters. But for something this menacing to be here… Don’t tell me…”

I gave orders over his rambling. “Professor Narcisse, you need to fall back. Julius and Chris will take the front. Jilk, you support them from behind.”

Jilk glanced at me sidelong. He already had a grenade in his hand. “Oh? Are you going to spectate, Earl Bartfort?”

“As if, you moron. I’m going to loop around behind and chip away from a safe distance.”

I set off, which Julius and Chris took as their cue to charge. The Chimera fixed its gaze on us for a moment, then threw back its head and unleashed an earsplitting cry.

Jilk didn’t wait for it to finish before going on the offensive. “How do you like this?!”

A grenade erupted, the explosion swallowing the beast. Strangely, the Chimera ignored the fire singing its fur and went after Julius and Chris instead. It lunged at them, running on all fours as it tried to skewer them with its horns.

“Coming after me, are you? I must commend you for your bravery!” Julius stabbed his sword into the ground. A magic circle appeared in front of him, conjuring a shield that deflected the beast.

Chris used the opening to make his move. “Hyaaah!”

He swung his sword with both hands, leaving a deep gash in the Chimera’s flesh. His blade seemed to glow, a trail of light shining in its wake.

“Be careful!” Professor Narcisse shouted. “It has powerful regenerative abilities!”

Almost immediately, the beast’s wounds began to heal. I circled behind and fired my shotgun.

“Aim for its eyes!” I barked at Jilk.

“You sure do ask for the impossible.” Jilk huffed, then took aim with his rifle and blasted at its eyes.

These guys might be otherwise useless, but their skills in battle are the real deal.

“Chris!” I bellowed. “Pincer attack!”

“Very well!”

While the others went for its legs, I took aim with my shotgun and fired. Blood gushed out of the Chimera’s head, but its eyes regenerated quickly and fixed on me.
“Heya,” I said.
It howled and charged. I had already set up this little trap, so I just whipped out the portable terminal and pressed a button. A number of magical circles appeared around me.
“Man, this thing sure is convenient!”
The Chimera slammed into an invisible wall and went tumbling. Jilk used the opening to throw another grenade.
He really doesn’t show any mercy, does he?
However, when the smoke cleared, our opponent was still raring to go. Its limbs had already regenerated.
“Bartfort!” Julius shouted. “We can’t take this thing down if it keeps healing like that.”
“Don’t worry. I’ve got this in the bag.” I loaded one of my special magic shells into my shotgun and cocked it. “All of you, get back!”
Once Julius and Chris were at a safe distance, I pulled the trigger. The bullet hit its mark, blowing away the creature’s entire upper body. Its regenerative abilities couldn’t catch up. The beast erupted in a puff of black smoke that swallowed the entire room.
Through the haze, I saw something shining. It had a green hue and absorbed all of the fumes. Once the air cleared, all that was left was a single sapling.
I stowed my shotgun away. “This is definitely it.”
The sapling gave off a celestial glow in the light pouring through the open ceiling. It was a key item from the sequel: the offspring of the Sacred Tree.

Chapter 9:
A Despicable Trap

I ASKED PROFESSOR NARCISSE to appraise the Sacred Tree's Sapling.

"Th-this is amazing. It's just as I've read: Monsters really *do* protect the sapling. How many of them did we face on our way here?!"

"Then you're sure it's real? It's the Sacred Tree's Sapling?" I asked.

The professor nodded, his eyes sparkling with fascination. He wasn't even looking at me. All of his attention was glued to the sapling. "Yes, there's no mistake. Saplings have been discovered many times before, but the last one withered and died. More importantly, the scholars of the republic have realized that there must be some deeper underlying meaning to the locations where saplings are found. It would be best to secure this location, and..."

Wow, this guy could ramble forever. I dropped my bag and pulled out an acrylic case. Then I ripped the plant out of the ground. "Up we go!"

"Wh-what do you think you're doing?!" Professor Narcisse screeched, his face contorted with despair.

I smiled as I plonked the sapling down into the container. "This was the whole reason we came here. I figured it would be the perfect bait for the Six Great Houses. Good thing we found it."

I'd suspected it would take us days. We were lucky to have found it so quickly.

"The sapling was your objective? You mean you *knew* it was here?"

"I didn't know for *sure*. But lucky for us, it was. I'm going to use this to lure out that bastard Pierre."

My intel indicated that the nobles desperately coveted these saplings. Marie hadn't been totally clear on the specifics, but she *did* know this was a key item in the game, so it *had* to have some profound meaning.

"Hold on," Narcisse begged. "I will contact my family, and we'll have Pierre return your ship. Please, offer the sapling to the republic. It isn't something to gamble with."

I finished transplanting the sapling into its new container and put the case over it, cradling it in both hands.

It shouldn't wither. At least, not for the time being. I hope. Then I looked Narcisse in the eye. "No. I want to knock Pierre off his high horse."

Narcisse shook his head in dismay, unable to comprehend my feelings.

"Oh!" he said, looking up. "But we could at least secure the area. If one sapling was able to grow here, we may be able to get our hands on another—"

He stopped mid-sentence, turning pale as he glanced around.

"Jilk! Look at this enormous Suspension Stone!" Julius shouted, proudly cradling the thing in his arms. "And it's all ours."

Jilk gazed at it enviously. “Your Highness, please lend me the shovel next.”
“I cannot do that. I want to gather more of these myself.”
While the two of them quibbled like children over a toy, Chris pulled off his sweat-stained shirt. They had already set about excavating the area and gathering metals into a pile.
When he was finished, Chris wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Quite the accomplishment. We got a good haul. Though it will prove difficult to carry this much back.”
Their digging had made a mess of the entire area.
“What are you buffoons doing?!” Narcisse howled.
I took out my terminal and began fiddling with it. After a moment, the ship that had brought us here slowly dropped down from the ceiling.
“I-Isn’t that your ship, Leon? How does it move without anyone to man it?!”
As soon as something new drew his interest, Narcisse calmed right down.
I turned to Julius, who was still balancing an enormous Suspension Stone in his arms. “Take all the treasure aboard. I’ll sell it off once we get back.”
“Bartfort, your ship moves on its own?”
“Yup, sure does. Also, you should know that by ‘get back,’ I mean we’re not selling any of this until we’re in the kingdom. You’ll just have to make do with an advance payment in the meantime.”
“That’s fine, but…”
Apparently, they were all more interested in my ship. I hastily climbed on board, not interested in giving them a complete rundown. “I’ll go get the equipment we need. You guys load up.”
Inside, I discovered a letter that hadn’t been there when we left. There was also a paper bag pull of dog food for Elle. I scanned the contents of the message and then tucked it away in my pocket.

***

At around that same time, several men in black suits were boarding the *Einhorn* where it sat at anchor in the harbor. Their leader was dressed in flashy clothes, and a stole was draped around his shoulders.
Pierre rolled up to greet them. “Heya. You’re still kicking, I see.”
The portly man removed his hat deferentially. “Lord Pierre, I see you have found an even more ostentatious way of entertaining yourself.”
“And who is this man?” Luxion asked, curious.
“Huh? Sheesh, you sure are annoying. He’s a merchant. The kind that sells under the table, if ya know what I mean.”
“Intriguing.”
The man puffed on a cigar and ordered his men to hand over a number of leather bags. Pierre’s minions examined the contents. Each one was filled with rolls of cash.
“Just as described, Mr. Pierre.”
“Good. Then bring out the merch.”

The bills the merchant offered amounted to tens of millions of yen. In return, Pierre's flunkies hauled out an enormous ball that glowed faintly green.
The merchant's lips peeled back in a wide smile. "Pleasure doing business with you, as always."
"I'm grateful too," Pierre said. "That Precious Orb has lost most of its juice, but it's lined my pockets nicely."
Luxion eyed the object, carefully recording all the data he could.
So this is a Precious Orb. From what I hear, you find them inside fruit from the Sacred Tree. It has a considerable amount of energy. This is the first time I've seen one, though. This country keeps them under strict control.
It seemed fishy that Pierre was selling something so precious behind closed doors. Luxion could only guess he had a secret deal with this merchant.
The merchant smiled. "Now that we've seen to that business, how soon will you be able to secure your position as the new head of House Feivel?"
Pierre smiled darkly and bit his thumbnail. "My father has taken great interest in this ship. I told him we'll go to war with the kingdom eventually, so we can steal their technology and mass produce it. That delighted him. I may be able to inherit his seat without even making my older brother disappear."
"That is wonderful news! I was wise to invest in you."
Luxion continued noting everything down. So Pierre aims to inherit his father's position, and he's teamed up with this merchant to sell off Precious Orbs. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that he's trying to secure funds to achieve his goals.
Pierre was even willing to take down his older brother to climb to the top. Luxion had to admire the boy's spirit. That ambition was a quality Leon lacked. Alas, Pierre's motivation couldn't compensate for his lack of social skills.
As Pierre chatted with the merchant, his lackeys started counting out the money. Although they were technically his subordinates, most of them looked like thugs. Or pirates, now that they had a ship. One of them came scrambling over.
"Mr. Pierre! We have trouble!"
"Stop shouting. What's going on? Have those losers from the kingdom invaded?" Whatever it was, Pierre didn't seem too concerned.
"It's not that. Someone found a Sacred Tree Sapling! And it hasn't withered yet!"
"Seriously?" Pierre's eyes widened, and he leaned closer.
"Yes. The only problem is, it was one of the exchange students who found it. And the worst part is, it was Leon. He's brought it to the school and is demanding that you come see him."
Luxion floated quietly, observing.
Pierre pulled a face. "He had the nerve to call me out? Hm, but I *do* want that sapling. Still, even I can't move too boldly on campus."

“Th-that’s not all. Miss Louise seems to be backing his challenge, and he has Professor Narcisse on his side too.”

“Louise?” Pierre fell into silent contemplation. Apparently, Narcisse was irrelevant to his interests. “Well, whatever. It’s worth going to take a look at least.”

Luxion lingered behind as Pierre and his minions hurried to the school. They already have the Sacred Tree, and yet they still covet this sapling. I can understand why they might want it, but their actions almost look… desperate.

His red lens gave off an eerie glow.

***

When we reached the academy, I was escorted straight to a reception room. I kicked back and put my legs on the coffee table, balancing the sapling in one hand.

The teachers scowled at me.

“Mr. Bartfort, surely you can understand that attitude is inappropriate.”

“This is precisely why I say these Holfortians are savages.”

“Please put the sapling down. What happens if you drop it?!”



Their responses varied, but all of them were panicked by the presence of the sapling. Surprisingly, it was Professor Clement who took charge.
“Calm down, everyone. Narcy, please explain what’s going on.”
“Professor Clement, why are you clinging to my arm?”
“Oh, goodness. I am, aren’t I? How naughty of me!”
He was theoretically trying to mediate, but Professor Clement soon took the opportunity to sidle up to Narcisse.
What’s with that bizarre nickname—Narcy?
Clearly, Narcisse was Clement’s type. Despite what he’d said, Professor Clement showed no signs of backing off. Still, Narcisse remained oblivious to his affections.
Damn, he sure is slow on the uptake. If he can’t take a hint like this, it’s not my fault if it ends in disaster.
The other teachers averted their eyes and fell silent while Miss Louise chastised me.
“Leon, your behavior is unbecoming.”
“My bad. I guess I can’t help it. You know, since I’m just a ‘savage, wannabe adventurer’ and all. It’s not my fault I’m being so rough with this sapling. I was just born this way.”
My sarcasm prompted some bitter looks. I dropped my feet and put the sapling (or rather, *my* sapling) on the table. Although I kept my hand firmly planted on the case.
“Enough chitchat,” I said. “How long will you keep me waiting? Bring Pierre.”
“Please address *Lord* Pierre by his proper title!” one of the professors babbled. “He hails from one of the Great Houses. Miss Louise, I beg you not to align yourself with this ruffian.”
I glanced over at Louise, but she showed no sign of listening to her teacher.
“Who I choose to align myself with is no concern of yours.”
She was practically a princess, so they could say nothing more. Although they brought up a valid point: Why was she going out of her way to support me? I didn’t get the sense that she was trying to take advantage of the situation.
Professor Narcisse breathed a sigh. “It looks like he’s here.”
The door burst open, and Pierre waltzed in with his lackeys. It was still early in the day, but they all reeked of alcohol. Pierre looked indignant, but as soon as he saw the sapling, his eyes went wide.
“Is it the real deal?” He completely ignored me, stretching out his hand.
“Don’t even try it,” I warned, lifting the case off the table.
He glared at me. “Bastard. How dare you take that tone with me!”
The seal on the back of his hand began to glow, but Miss Louise stepped in.
“Stop it. It’s two against one here, Pierre.”
“Piss off, Louise! Or do you really intend to oppose me? The tree chose us both. We should be on the same side!”

Pierre thought mutual pride in being the tree's chosen meant a whole lot, but his protests fell on deaf ears—Miss Louise wasn't backing down.
"Pierre," said Narcisse. "Don't do anything foolish."
"So now the wannabe scholar is taking sides too, huh? Can't believe you'd let this rat take a sapling of the Sacred Tree. Don't you have any pride?!"
The other teachers kept their mouths shut, not daring to reprimand him.
This was getting on my last nerve.
"Enough," I snapped. "You go on and on, like some whiny dog. Listening to you just pisses me off. I think it's about time you made good on your promise."
Pierre's followers looked like delinquents who were always ready to go, but they couldn't do anything with Narcisse and Miss Louise on my side.
Pierre, on the other hand, shoved his hands in his pockets like a street thug as he leaned close to my face. "What did you say?"
"We talked about this before," I reminded him. "You said that if I put something of value on the table, you'd agree to a match. Or does the memory escape you? Ah, how rude of me. Maybe the details were too difficult for your tiny brain to handle."
His face flushed. "Screw you! I'll kill you right now!"
"Be my guest, if you think you have the balls. Although this sapling will go with me."
I waved the case in front of his face, and his mouth snapped shut. The sapling was only a key item in the game, but its existence in real life was plenty useful.
"Put the *Einhorn* on the table," I said, "and I'll agree to a match. Let's make it a simple duel. We'll battle each other in Armors, on the condition that you don't use the Sacred Tree's power."
For a split second, Pierre's eyes widened. He hesitated, shaken by my request. "Why should you decide the rules? That's not fair."
"Not fair, huh? Ironic, considering the surprise attack you launched on us. Maybe you should look in a mirror."
"Ugh!" He was on the verge of exploding again, but there was nothing he could do while I had two other crest-bearers backing me up.
"Quibbling is a waste of time," I said. "Unlike you, I'm not a coward. That's why I'm offering a *fair* fight. Just the two us, Armor against Armor. Miss Louise and Professor Narcisse can act as witnesses. Or is that still not good enough? Don't tell me you can't win unless the fight is rigged in your favor?"
Pierre amused me, if only because his reactions were so predictable. "Fine," he snapped. "I'll do it."
"Good. Then why don't we swear by the Sacred Tree? I'm betting this sapling. If I lose, it's all yours."
"Fine. If I lose, you get your ship back."

"No. There's no point in you returning my ship if it's empty. You're going to return everything you stole. You got that? *Everything*. The second you lose, you hand it all over. Directly to me."
If he gave the ship back without Arroganz, I'd be livid. There was no way I'd let that fly.
Pierre pulled a face. "Fine. I'll give your stupid stuff back. If I lose, I'll return *everything* I took. There, satisfied?"
He was so confident he'd win that he wasn't interested in the specifics.
"And you need to do it directly," I reminded him. "Right in front of me. I mean it. Everything."
"Yeah, yeah. *If* you beat me."
"Very well," Narcisse interjected to confirm. "Louise and I will act as witnesses. You both agree to these terms and swear an oath to the Sacred Tree, correct?"
Yes, this is perfect. I grinned from ear to ear. "Of course."
Pierre scowled. "Hold up a second. Does he even *have* an Armor?"
Aww, how sweet of you to worry about me. I shrugged. "Nope. I figured the republic could supply me with one."
That should have been the end of our discussion, but Pierre was relentless. "No! It's not fair for the witnesses to help you out. You have to get an Armor yourself, otherwise our agreement is void."
Miss Louise opened her mouth to argue, but I held up my hand. "Fine. And what do you expect me to do if I can't find one?"
"Then you have to fight without. It'll make for an amazing show. You may be Holfort's little 'hero,' but you'll be a sitting duck before me. I can already picture you blubbering and pleading for mercy. It'll be glorious!"
I matched his maniacal grin with my own. "All right."
Miss Louise gasped, horrified. "Leon!"
Pierre shot a glance at Professor Narcisse. "He agreed to it. You guys don't have any complaints, right?"
"Pierre, you won't get away with any underhanded scheming," Professor Narcisse warned.
But with that, he lifted his right hand, and a magic circle appeared on the floor beneath us. This was a necessary step to swearing on the Sacred Tree. Once our showdown was over, the tree would hold us to our agreement.
"As sworn before the Sacred Tree," said Narcisse, "you have entered into a holy duel. I hope the gravity isn't lost on either of you."
That was probably his way of warning us against any behavior that undermined the sanctity of the match.
I held the sapling close to my side. "You have nothing to worry about from me."
Pierre motioned to his followers and started for the door. "Good luck finding an Armor in time." His eyes narrowed, conveying the underlying threat.
"Don't worry," I said. "I'll manage."

***

Pierre was in good spirits as he returned to the *Einhorn*. He took a swig of liquor and paused in the storage area where Arroganz was kept. The Armor was newly decorated with a number of sharp, spiky protrusions.

Pierre cackled. “He really is a complete moron!”

All of his followers agreed. Pierre drained the bottle in a single gulp and tossed it away. It shattered, but no one paid it any mind. The inside of the *Einhorn* was littered with garbage, and a cleaning robot silently set about handling the mess.

“He actually thinks he can get his hands on an Armor. What a fool.”

One of Pierre’s lackeys passed him another bottle. “That was pretty merciless of you, Mr. Pierre—sayin’ he’s still gotta fight, even if he can’t get an Armor.”

“It’s his fault for being so gullible.”

They spoke as though they’d already won.

“Getting my hands on that sapling should be more than enough for my father to appoint me his heir. Then I can send my older brother packing,” Pierre said, thinking about what he would do after he became the head of his house. “House Rault won’t be able to swing its weight around then. And I’ll claim that stuck-up Louise as my arm candy.”

“Uh, are you sure that’s a good idea?” one of his lackeys chimed in. “I’ve heard rumors that she’s set to marry Mr. Hugues.”

“Like I give a crap. Once I have the sapling, her father will beg me to marry her. Louise is the only woman out there who’s good enough for me.” Pierre struck on another idea. “But I should get some insurance, just in case.”

He smirked, anxiously awaiting the day of his match.

***

Lelia hovered in front of Leon’s house. She had a memo in hand as she stepped up and pressed the doorbell, but to her dismay, no one answered.

“You have to be kidding me,” she said, annoyed. “Why isn’t anyone coming?”

She continued to jab her finger on the doorbell until a passerby hurried over.

“Miss, the person who lives here hasn’t been home for a while.”

“What?”

They were apparently a neighbor, because they were able to fill her in. “He packed up and took off. It looked like a lot of luggage for a simple trip. I found it odd. That’s why I remember. I wondered if he was moving.”

“D-do you know where he went?!”

“Not a clue. The guy had started living with a girl—one about your age. I assume the two of them eloped.”

The person took their leave, and Lelia gasped in disbelief, dropping the note she'd been holding.
"This can't be. If it's true, then I'm in serious trouble! Aaaaaaah!"
She stood there screaming for a good long while, cradling her head in both hands.

***

"What are we going to do? Seriously, Big Bro!"
"Shut up already, *Miss* Marie."
As the day of our duel approached, I took refuge at Marie's place. The best way to stay safe was to huddle up.
When I tacked "Miss" onto Marie's name, tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, come on! If things go on like this, you won't find an Armor in time for the duel. It'll be hard enough to beat Arroganz as it is. If you try to fight him with your bare fists, he'll squash you like a bug!"
"It's not my fault. No one is selling. The merchants here are stingy."
"This is no laughing matter!"
Marie was being meeker than usual, probably because she thought I was still angry with her. Even now, she was waiting on me hand and foot. I took a sip of the tea she'd prepared and wrinkled my nose.
"It's lukewarm. Pour me another."
"As you wish." She swallowed back her tears, snatching up my cup and stalking out into the hallway. Once she thought I was out of earshot, she started cursing. "Stupid tea freak! What the hell is wrong with him?!"
She was so naive that she thought I wouldn't hear. How like her.
I stretched out in my seat, contemplating how to pass the time until the duel. "If I can't get my hand on an Armor, I guess I really will have to face Arroganz with my bare fists. Hmm, what a dilemma."
My partner was nowhere to be seen, but I still glanced over my right shoulder, as if I expected to see him hovering there. "That stubborn idiot," I grumbled.
Noelle popped into the room. "Hey, is something going on with Rie? She's shoving a thermometer into a teapot and muttering to herself. And she keeps alternating between adding warm and cold water. Is she performing some kind of experiment?"
Marie had to be fussing over the temperature of the tea. No wonder Noelle thought she was experimenting.
"I'm just teasing her. She performs best under pressure." Why hadn't she just put in her best effort to begin with?
"Oh, really?" said Noelle. "You two sure are close. Anyway, there's someone here to see you."
"Who is it?"
"Louise."

***

Miss Louise was waiting at the front entrance. The moment she spotted Noelle, she crossed her arms beneath her voluptuous breasts and scowled.
“So she really *is* living here.”
Noelle turned away. “Just drop it.”
“Hmph. I don’t have time to play games with you anyway. Leon, I heard that you haven’t been able to secure an Armor yet. Is that true?”
I nodded.
Her brow creased with frustration. “Sadly, I cannot help you.”
“Because of your part in our oath to the Sacred Tree?” I guessed.
“Precisely. Pierre might not have put much thought into what he was saying, but the rest of us take our oaths to the Sacred Tree very seriously.”
Noelle frowned. “*Sacred* Tree? Don’t make me laugh.”
They glowered at each other, and I clapped my hands to interrupt them.
“Enough, no fighting. So, Miss Louise, is that all you came here for?”
“Afraid not. I would like you to bring the sapling and meet my father. We can ask him to negotiate with House Feivel on our behalf. That will resolve this matter much more smoothly than this dreadful duel.”
I assumed she meant to arrange an exchange—where I gave up the sapling in exchange for the *Einhorn*. That would theoretically solve the problem, but I couldn’t agree.
“Not good enough”
“And why not?! If you go through with this duel, you’ll be a dead man!”
No man could face an Armor with his bare fists. I knew that much.
“I appreciate the fact that you want to help. And I can forgive most transgressions, but not Pierre’s. He has to pay.” I should have crushed him sooner. Instead, I’d fussed over his importance to the game, like a fool.
Noelle peered at me, full of concern. “Um, hey, maybe you shouldn’t push your luck. I agree that Pierre is at fault, but that’s exactly why you should let Louise handle this.”
“The two of you do realize why I’m called the Hero of Holfort, right?”
“Huh? Um, because you’re strong?” Noelle offered, confused.
Miss Louise gave the query some deeper consideration. “Because of your good fortune, I assume? No matter how powerful a person is, no one becomes a hero without the chance to prove themselves.”
“Bingo! You’re both right, but I would answer a little differently. Being a hero means not going into battles you can’t win. You only fight someone if you know you can beat them.”
“B-but isn’t that underhanded?” Noelle blurted.
“W-well,” I stammered. “Being underhanded on the battlefield is a virtue.”
Luxion had said as much, so it had to be true.

***

The day before the duel, Pierre and his lackeys went to a tavern to celebrate.
“My triumph is assured! Drink up, boys!”
His thugs chased off the regular patrons and placed their own orders. As Pierre nursed his drink, the owner edged over and plucked up the courage to speak.
“Lord Pierre, I’m afraid your tab is already quite substantial. Also, please ask your companions not to cause further trouble.”
Pierre lifted his cup and tipped the contents over the man’s head. “What was that? You think you can give orders to a great lord like me?”
“N-no, I would never dream of—”
“You and your ilk are garbage. You should be thanking me for the fact you can even live in the republic!” Pierre threw a punch at the man, but it had less effect than he desired. That only incensed him further. “Boys, trash the place!”
At his command, Pierre’s gang of ruffians leaped to their feet and began tearing the tavern apart. The panicked owner latched on to one of them, trying to stop their rampage.
“Please, no more! I beg of you!”
“This is your fault for pissing off Mr. Pierre!”
The thug flung the man to the floor. The owner’s wife and daughter hurried over to his side and wrapped their arms around him.
“Dear!”
“Dad!”
Pierre’s lips twisted into a deranged grin. “You know what, alcohol isn’t nearly exciting enough. We deserve a real celebration, and you’ve pissed me off. Maybe I should make your family pay.”
The man sensed Pierre’s meaning, jumping forward to shield his wife and daughter. “No, stop this!”
Pierre lifted his right hand, calling roots through the floorboards. Pierre’s subordinates gathered around as the roots twisted themselves around the owner.
“You two are coming with us.”
The ruffians led the man’s wife and daughter away while he stretched his hands out after them. “Let them go!”
Pierre sneered. “Oh, I will. After I’ve had my fun. Right now, you should be more concerned for your own well-being.”
He went outside with his flunkies, and they set the tavern ablaze. The two women sobbed as the flames swallowed the building.
“Nooo!”
Pierre cackled gleefully. “See what happens to anyone who opposes me?!”
The townspeople looked on bitterly. None of them dared say a word.
Eventually, military showed up to see what was going on, but as soon as they realized Pierre was involved, they set about extinguishing the fire without bothering to arrest him.

“Just do what I tell you, peons!” Pierre bellowed.
Behind him, the building smoldered.

***

It was the day of the duel, and I still hadn’t managed to get my hands on an Armor. I was at the mansion, stooping beside Elle as she gulped down her food.
“Make sure you eat it all. Your master will be coming back soon.” I didn’t expect her to understand, but she did pause to look at me briefly.
Kyle stood behind me with his arms crossed. “I see you’re as carefree as ever, Earl Bartfort. Won’t you please take this more seriously?”
“Eh, it’s not my fault. Elle has a soothing effect on me.”
“Your duel is today. Can you win?”
“Hmm, good question.”
He stared a hole through me. “I will choose to believe that you have some kind of plan. My mistress has been acting very odd lately.”
I lifted myself up. “Don’t worry. Odd is her default.”
Carla hurried over with a brown paper bag. “Earl Bartfort, a package arrived for you.”
“You don’t say?”
“Yes, although no one knows who sent it.”
“Don’t worry about that,” I said, taking the bag from her. Inside was a black leather glove with a knuckle guard. I tucked it into my pocket and pointed at Elle. “You’ll stay behind to look after her, right?”
“Yes,” said Carla. “I will take good care of her!” She had lured me into a trap once before, but you wouldn’t have known it by how earnest she looked now—as if she’d left all her scheming days behind.
“I’m counting on you.”
“I’m coming to root for you with everyone else,” Kyle interjected.
“Yeah? Then you better place your bets on me. I’ll make you filthy rich.”
“Regrettably, Alzer does not allow betting on matches sworn on the Sacred Tree. My lady informed me of that.”
“Huh, seriously?” What a bummer. I’d been hoping to bet on myself again. *Oh well, such is life.*
“In that case, I’d better be off. See you guys later.”
As I turned to leave, Noelle came running with the sapling in her hands.
“Leon, you forgot this! You’d be in serious trouble without it.”
I stroked my chin. As I stared at her, an idea popped into my head. “You keep it.”
Noelle’s forehead wrinkled. “What? Really? But it’s super important, right?”
I chuckled. “I get the feeling it’ll be a lot safer in your hands than mine. Don’t worry if someone steals it from you. I’ll be sure to get it back.”
“I’ll keep it safe.” Noelle hugged the sapling close and flashed a smile. Just for a moment, I felt envious of Jean.

Ugh, what’s wrong with me? I’m already engaged!

***

Marie called over her shoulder as she left with the boys. “Carla, please look after Brad and Elle!”
Carla hugged Elle as she saw everyone off at the door. Once they were gone, she took the dog outside for a breath of fresh air. “Come on, let’s go out for a bit.”
Stepping out into the garden, Carla noticed that the gate was ajar. She walked over to close it, but before she could, a man reached out and grabbed her.
“Huh?”
Carla gaped for a moment before panic set in. Men in black suits forced the gate open and flooded in to surround her.
“Wh-what are you doing?!” she demanded.
“This girl’s all we need, right?”
“Yep.”
“Well then, let’s take her and go.”
They pulled out a rope, striking fear into Carla’s heart. Brad stepped out of the house, wondering what all of the fuss was about.
“I only meant to take a peek and see what was going on,” he remarked. “Looks like we’ve got more trouble on our doorstep.”
“Mr. Brad!”
“Release her now,” Brad warned. “Before I make you.” He was poised to fight, although he still hadn’t recovered from his injuries.
The suits exchanged looks.
“Shall we hurt him?”
“May as well. We can look for the sapling while we’re at it.”
Cold sweat ran down Brad’s forehead. “Well, this is troubling. And I’m still not in top shape.”

Chapter 10:
Marie's Turn

THE ALZER REPUBLIC'S ARENA was a circular stadium with towering walls and raised seats for the spectators. The only real difference between now and when I'd fought at the Holfort Academy was the crowd. There, they had rained insults down on me. Here, they just chatted amongst themselves and regarded me with pity.

"I can't believe it. He really showed up unarmed."

"He's dead meat."

"That's what he gets for messing with the nobility."

The only ones laughing were Pierre's minions, jeering from the safety of their seats.

"What's wrong, 'hero'?"

"Yeah, couldn't get you an Armor in time?"

"Least you have some balls, coming here unarmed!"

What a bunch of goons.

A black machine—Arroganz—descended from the sky and landed with a flourish. It had far more spiky decorations than I remembered.

"Ugh, he has awful taste."

A skull had been painted on it, which I could only assume was also Pierre's doing. The whole suit looked horribly sinister.

Pierre laughed at me from the pilot seat. "What was all that about fighting me in an Armor, huh?"

Yeah, I'd said that before he pressured every merchant in the republic not to sell to me. And now he was mocking me for it. He had some nerve.

"Don't play games," I said. "You wanted this from the start."

"It's your own fault. You played right into my hands!"

Pierre was right. If you were gullible enough to let someone fool you, then you deserved everything you got.

Arroganz pointed at me, looking every bit the villain now. "It's too late to apologize. You won't get my forgiveness!"

I took the black glove out of my pocket and pulled it on.

"What?" Pierre cackled. "You plan to fight me like that?"

I put my hand on my hip and stared at him. "Enough, let's do this."

"Yeah, okay. What a shame. Guess I didn't need insurance after all."

I quirked a brow at him. "Huh?"

Pierre snickered to himself. "Carla, wasn't it? And there was a dog with her too."

He didn't need to explain any further.

"You slime," I hissed.

"Now why don't we get this match started?"

You really are every bit the scumbag I thought you were.

***

Marie listened from the stands. The moment she heard Carla's name, her eyes widened. Pierre didn't say what he'd done, but Marie needed no help imagining.

Greg punched his palm. "Sneaky bastard! Wasn't he the one who agreed not to use underhanded tactics? Isn't this duel supposed to be sacred or some crap?!"

Julius's nostrils flared. "Not only did he steal that Armor, now he's taken a hostage."

Narcisse and Louise weren't about to let this "duel" go any further.

"This is a breach of our terms. We cannot allow this match to proceed."

"Yes. We should cancel it immediately."

While they consulted with one another, Marie realized Leon was mouthing something. He slipped the portable terminal out from his pocket and tossed it to her. She caught it and peered at him. The meaning of his expression was clear: Go save Carla and the dog.

Marie glanced down at the tablet. It was similar enough to a smartphone that she could navigate its interface with ease. It contained a map, showing the location where Pierre's minions were keeping Carla.

Noelle glanced over. "What is it?"

Marie lifted her chin, eyes narrowed. "This is our chance to redeem ourselves," she muttered, her voice ice cold.

"Huh?"

Marie turned to the boys. "Aren't you all tired of whining like a bunch of babies?!"

"B-but, Marie," Julius stammered. "We're just worried about Carla—"

"If you're so worried, let's go rescue her."

"Please calm down, Miss Marie," Jilk said placatingly. "We don't even know where they are. And Pierre could be bluffing. We need to relax and gather more information."

"What cowardly nonsense is that?!" she spat back. "Where have your spines gone? Leon's about to pummel this rat. Meanwhile, *we're* going to save Carla and Elle!"

Chris hesitated, glancing at the arena. "B-but Pierre has an Armor—"

"And Leon beat all of you, remember? Do you seriously think he'd show up for this unprepared? Have some faith. He wouldn't waltz into this duel unless he had something up his sleeve. He's thorough and relentless. He drives his opponents into the pits of despair!"

Everyone fell silent.

Kyle scratched his cheek. "Without Miss Carla's help, my work will increase tenfold. We need to save her. Now. I'm sure the earl has this situation under control."

“Stop standing around and twiddling your thumbs!” Marie bellowed. “They kicked our butts, now it’s time for us to kick theirs!”
“You have a point.” Julius grinned. “Yeah! I guess I was feeling intimidated.”
Jilk nodded. “I didn’t realize it, but she’s right.”
“Then let’s go! We’ll head back to the estate and work out the details there.” Marie stood and led the boys out of the arena.
Narcisse was stunned by the display, but he soon returned to his senses. “W-wait just a moment! We’re canceling this match!”
Marie glanced back at him. “That’s obviously not an option!” she snarled. “I don’t care what you do, but you need to buy us time. We’re going to go save Carla. Don’t you *dare* get in our way!”
Narcisse shot a pleading look at Louise, hoping for her assistance. “Uh…”
Louise glanced down at the duelists. Leon was gesturing at her to continue the match. She sighed and put a hand on her hip. “It appears he wants to continue.”
Noelle hugged the sapling to her chest. “Leon…”
It seemed like the duel would go ahead as planned.

***

Marie returned to the mansion to find Brad covered in fresh injuries.
“Brad!” She raced to his side and cradled him in her arms, using healing magic to mend what she could.
His eyes fluttered open. “I’m sorry, Marie. I wasn’t able to protect Miss Carla and Elle.”
“Don’t talk right now.”
Marie finished performing first aid and had Greg and Chris carry Brad back to bed.
Meanwhile, Julius surveyed the garden. The thugs who’d taken Carla had left it in disarray. They’d raided the mansion as well. “I can’t believe they would go so far.”
“So this is the kind of underhanded stunt they’d pull during a ‘sacred duel,’ huh?” Kyle scoffed, disgusted. “These Alzerians must have a very different understanding of the word ‘sacred.’”
Marie glanced down at her tablet. An exclamation mark popped up on the screen and an alarm blared. “What? Something above me? Ack!”
There was a brief warning of something coming from above, then some kind of box slammed into the ground with an earsplitting crash, sending up plumes of dirt.
Kyle eyed the box. “Wh-what is this? Another attack?”
Marie clutched the tablet, edging closer. She pulled the lid off the box and peered inside.
“Miss Marie!” Jilk cried. “Stop! That’s dangerous!”
He tried to stop her, but she ignored him. Marie stuck her hand inside and pulled out a gun. One that she recognized. “He’s telling us to use this, huh?”

It was a submachine gun. The same kind she'd seen in old mafia films, complete with drum-shaped magazine.

Julius peeked into the box and pulled out some ammunition. "Rubber bullets? Why does he have something like this?"

Marie propped the gun against her shoulder as she examined the rest of the contents. There were all different kinds of firearms and other such weapons, including pistols and shotguns.

"It doesn't matter. We're going to make good use of these. Boys, get yourselves ready. We're going to get Carla."

***

Inside one of the many buildings in the warehouse district was Pierre's merchant friend. He was wearing a gaudy suit and had a cigar protruding from his mouth. Wisps of smoke spilled over his lips as he stared down at Carla, who was anxiously clinging to Elle. The dog licked at her cheek, trying to calm her.

"Bad luck, little girl. You guys made enemies with the wrong people. If you had played your cards better, maybe you could have returned to your kingdom."

Carla tried to put on a brave front, although her whole body was trembling. "I-I could say the same to you. Don't you think you're underestimating Earl Bartfort? H-he's the Hero of Holfort, you know. He defeated some powerful people and saved the whole country. He's a legend!"

The merchant stifled a laugh, and his subordinates snickered along.

"Little girl, he may be amazing where you come from, but this is the center of the world. Your backwater hero holds no power here. He's probably being beaten to a pulp as we speak."

Carla dropped her gaze and hugged Elle more tightly.

The merchant grinned. "If you keep quiet and do as you're told, Mr. Pierre might be willing to show you some mercy, and—"

Before he could finish, the warehouse door blew open. His subordinates immediately readied their weapons as light spilled into the darkness. Dust danced in the air around a hazy silhouette.

"Shoot!" the merchant barked, terrified. "Shoot them right now!"

For a while, all that could be heard was the echo of gunfire. Once his minions had emptied their guns, the warehouse fell silent. The merchant and his men could only gape as the silhouette stood there unharmed, protected by a magic shield. Deformed bullets were scattered across the ground around them.

The magic dissipated, and a petite blonde girl stepped forward, holding an unusually enormous weapon.

Tears streamed down Carla's cheeks. "Lady Maaaarie!"

"Give Carla baaaaack!" Marie fired off a barrage of nonlethal rounds, spraying the merchant's subordinates and leaving him gawking.

Wh-what is that weapon?! the merchant wondered. He'd never seen anything like it. It fired so fast that it made his jaw drop, but it soon ran out of ammunition.
"Now's our chance! Pin that girl down! And whatever you do, make sure you get that weapon!"
He wanted this rare gun and was convinced that it couldn't be lethal. Not one of his subordinates had died after its ammunition hit them.
As the lackeys encroached, a boy suddenly appeared behind Marie and blasted them back. He advanced until he was standing at her side. Marie passed the submachine gun over and took out a pistol.
"Don't move! There's nowhere for you to run!"
The merchant glanced over his shoulder as someone crashed in through the back door.
Greg strode in with a shotgun in his hand. "We already took down your toadies outside."
The escape route was gone, along with any backup the merchant might have summoned. Desperate, he whipped out a pistol and turned it on Carla.
"Screw you brats! I'll blow your little friend's head off—eek!"
Jilk fired a round at the merchant's arm. "A gentleman never turns his weapon on a lady."
He kept his gun trained on the merchant and smiled.
Chris set about tying up the flunkies, while Marie raced over to Carla and threw her arms around her.
"I am so glad you're okay!"
Carla burst into tears. "Waaaah!"
The merchant's expression soured as he cradled his injured arm. "Y-you brats won't get away with this."
Julius approached, the barrel of his gun pointed at the man. "We're sick of hearing that. Right now, you should be concerned with your own future. Marie, we need to let Bartfort know that Carla's safe."
Julius glanced over at her, but Marie was frowning down at her tablet.
"The duel has already begun."

***

Back in the arena, Pierre's patience was reaching its limit. "How long do you intend to keep me waiting?! You're violating the sanctity of this duel!"
I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes as I set about some elaborate pre-workout stretches.
"It is long past when we agreed to begin the duel!" Pierre howled at Professor Narcisse. "Keep dragging it out like this, and you're ignoring your oath to the Sacred Tree."
The audience was beginning to fuss too. Pierre had forced most of them to attend, and they were griping about how long it was taking. Personally, I couldn't fathom why he'd dragged them here to witness his supposed

victory in the first place. Even if he *did* manage to beat me, the scale was completely tipped in his favor. He would come out of this duel looking more like a bully than a valiant champion.

“Professor Narcisse,” I called out. “Please begin the match.”

Narcisse closed his eyes in contemplation, while Noelle and Miss Louise watched with concern. After a few moments, Narcisse raised his right hand. “Sacred Tree, please watch over this duel and grant victory to the righteous! Let the match begin!”

Pierre moved first, drawing two battleaxes from the container on Arroganz’s back and brandishing them at me. “I’ve been waiting for this! Now I’ll show you all how powerful I am!”

His voice was as menacing as Arroganz’s new makeover.

“It *does* look pretty intimidating from this perspective,” I mumbled, staring up at the robot.

Real talk, it was even more terrifying than facing down a high-speed truck barreling right toward me—but I raced forward all the same.

“What?!” Pierre was dumbfounded. He tried to swing his battleaxe, but by the time it came down, I had slipped between Arroganz’s feet.

“It’s actually pretty difficult to aim at a human, isn’t it?” I taunted, skidding to a halt behind him.

As Pierre spun Arroganz around, it was hard to reconcile his shriek with the ominous appearance of the suit. “Don’t get carried away just because you managed to dodge me once. This is a show! If you can’t put up a fight, the audience will soon tire of you.”

“I applaud your ability to whip up excuses.”

“You can beg for your life all you like, I won’t show you any mercy!”

“Good,” I said. “You’d better not forget those words.”

Arroganz came swinging with both axes raised high.

***

Marie stared down at her tablet, watching the match between Pierre and Leon. When she glanced up, she noticed an airbike inside the warehouse. It must have belonged to one of the merchant’s lackeys. It resembled a water ski and had enough room for several people.

“Jilk! Take that thing and get Carla back to the arena!”

Jilk stowed his pistol and mounted the bike. “Well, I suppose I *am* the best suited for the job.” He revved the engine and checked the machine over. “Good to go!”

Carla cradled Elle in her arms as Marie helped her onto the bike.

“Carla,” said Marie, “Leon will be able to really let go once he sees you’re safe.”

“A-all right. But, um, what will you do, Lady Marie?”

Marie glanced over at the merchant, who still had a sour look on his face. Julius, Greg, and Kyle were gathered around him. “We still have some

things to take care of here," she said. "Don't worry. I am positive Leon will win. Jilk, go quickly!"
"You can count on me. I will make haste!"
The airbike floated up into the air and sped off.
Once they were gone, Marie turned her attention to the merchant. "Looks like it's interrogation time."
The man wore a brave face. "I won't forget this. You'll all pay for—"
Marie pointed her pistol at him and pulled the trigger. Loud pops echoed through the room, followed by the echo of empty shell casings.
"Yooowch!" howled the merchant.
The bullets were nonlethal, but they still hurt when they hit their mark. Marie fired until her gun was empty, and the merchant's defiance crumbled into fear. Marie handed her gun to Kyle, who quickly reloaded it.
"Here you are, Master."
"Thank you, Kyle." She moved to stand directly in front of the merchant. "You had some nerve kidnapping my Carla. And even worse, you injured Brad!"
"N-no! I-I mean, I was ordered to do it! Mr. Pierre—I mean, that bastard, Pierre, he told me to do it! It's not my fau—auuugh!"
Marie emptied another magazine into him. This time, when she handed her pistol back to Kyle, he passed her the submachine gun.
The merchant was beaten black and blue, but Marie reached toward him and clapped her hands to his cheeks. Her fingers glowed with light, and his injuries immediately healed.
Relief washed through the man, and he smiled at her, entreating her to mercy. "Young lady, if you help me, I will assist you in escaping from that rat, Pierre."
She tsked and once more pulled the trigger.
The merchant writhed in pain. "Whyyy!"
Marie smiled sweetly at him. "That's not the information I'm looking for."
"I-I'll do whatever you ask. I'll tell you anything!"
"Oh, really?" Marie glanced at Chris. "Chris, do you have that thing?"
Chris gaped at her. "Huh? Uh, yeah. But what are you going to do with it? This is the first time I've ever seen someone purposefully seek out a defective knife."
They'd stopped on the way here to buy it, and it was every bit as poorly made as Chris implied. Marie took the knife and walked over to a row of metal shelving, against which she slammed the blade until the metal edge chipped.
Greg furrowed his brow. "Uh, Marie?"
Marie examined the jagged knife and nodded. "This should do."
She turned back toward the merchant, gripping the weapon tightly.
"W-wait! What are you planning to do with that?" the merchant demanded, his voice shaking.

“I read about this in one of your books,” she answered innocently. “This is how the republic conducts interrogations, no?”

His entire body shook violently.

“Don’t worry,” said Marie. “I’m skilled at healing magic. No matter how bad your injuries are, I can fix you up!”

“I’ll talk! I’ll spill everything!” the man sobbed. “Please, spare me!”

Marie smiled. “Oh, I’m going to keep going, but you can talk as much as you want. If you give me something interesting, maybe I’ll stop then.”



Kyle glanced at the quivering merchant and leaned in to whisper to her. "Master, you aren't really going to torture him, are you?"
"What? Of course not."
"But then why…"
Marie had no interest in something as gruesome as torture. "Idiot. I'm doing this to extract information. If we tell him what we want, he'll spew a bunch of lies and wiggle out of it. That's why I'm going to make him spill without asking any questions. If he *doesn't* know what we want, he'll say anything and everything to cover his butt."
She really had learned the technique in one of the republic's books. She was simply testing it out.
"You'd really go that far?" Kyle asked. "I am genuinely horrified."
"Oh, shut it. I need to win back Leon's trust! You *do not* want to know what it's like to be on his bad side. It's dangerous! If this wins me his favor, I'll do it!"
Kyle shook his head. "The earl wasn't even that angry. I'm sure he'll let you slide."
"Trust me, you don't know him like I do. Now shut up and let's get some intel out of this jerk. I need to earn some brownie points, or I'm next on Leon's hit list." Just thinking about it made Marie shudder. All the bravado she had shown just moments before was long gone.

***

Pierre finally got sick of me running around his feet and threw his axes aside.
"These weapons are useless!" He sounded like a child, blaming his weapons instead of himself.
"You lack basic skill," I said. "Blame Arroganz all you want. The truth is you have no talent as a pilot. You'd be better off without the Armor."
But Pierre had no interest in heeding my advice. This time, he whipped out a rifle. "Playtime is over," he hissed.
Gasps rang out in the stands.
Pierre took aim. "I'll blow you to pieces!"
A grin stretched across my face. "I'd like to see you try, you measly worm."
"Eat this!"
Pierre pulled the trigger, and I ducked and rolled—scrambling back to my feet so I could run along the arena wall. A thin glowing membrane stretched out in front of the stands. That magic theoretically protected the audience from crossfire. Sadly, one of Pierre's bullets went clean through it and left a hole in the wall.
"What's wrong?" I taunted. "I thought you said playtime was over."
A hail of bullets followed, and I darted away.
"You're a coward! All you do is flee!" Pierre kept firing, but none of his rounds hit their mark. "Why can't I hit him? This thing is a piece of junk!"

“Maybe you should accept your ineptitude,” I teased. “Arroganz is a powerful Armor, but you can’t even hit me.”
I could just picture him in the cockpit, his face red with fury.
“You’re a piece of garbage from a third-rate country!” Pierre shouted, chucking the rifle at me.
I ducked to avoid it, and he came charging. I slipped between his feet as one of his giant hands came crashing down.
“Haven’t you realized yet?” I asked. “Arroganz is *my* Armor. Of course I know its weaknesses.”
I’d known he would use Arroganz in this duel. A certain someone had doubtless encouraged him to do just that.
“You’re the loser here,” spat Pierre. “All you do is run like a cowardly dog. I’m sick of your boasting!”
“That’s rich coming from garbage like you,” I snapped back. “You can’t even win when you have the advantage. You’re the real dog here. Maybe you should start howling instead of whining like a baby!”
“Graaaaaaaaaah!”
This time, he whipped out an enormous black scythe. It almost made him look like a reaper, swinging it through the air as he chased after me. Its range was so vast that it was difficult to dodge.
“I sure am tired of running around a lot,” I snorted. I was completely soaked with sweat. It was dripping down my chin. I wiped some of it away and peered up into the stands.

***

This battle could hardly be called a real fight—not when one of its participants was completely unarmed while the other piloted an enormous Armor. Leon was putting on a good show, using his knowledge of Arroganz’s flaws to dodge each attack, but he was running out of stamina. Noelle was on the edge of her seat, clutching the sapling to her chest. How long would it be before Arroganz caught up with him? “This is no duel…” she murmured.
Cries of dismay echoed from the stands. Pierre might have forced the crowd to be here, but some of them were having trouble stomaching the display.
“Someone, please, stop this madness,” Noelle mumbled, dropping her gaze.
A voice called out through the cacophony of the crowd. “Want me to stop them?”
Was that…Loic? Noelle lifted her head to see him grinning down at her.
“I’ll stop them for you,” he said. “But you will become mine in exchange.”
“Loic, I can’t believe you! Even at a time like this…” She wrinkled her nose at him, disgusted to see him trying to take advantage of the situation.
“Going to blow me off again, huh? If you do, that boy will die.” Loic jabbed a finger at Leon, who was scrambling to escape Pierre’s attacks.

Leon leaped up into the air to avoid Arroganz's scythe, then hurried to put distance between himself and the towering machine. He was covered in dirt. One hit from Arroganz would mean death. It was a miracle he had survived this long.
Noelle covered her face. "No! I hate you!"
Loic stared down at her. "If he agrees to surrender the sapling, I'll work things out for him. If he refuses, House Barielle will blame Holfort, and the exchange students will pay the price in your stead. Their families will too."
Seeing the look on Loic's face and knowing the state of the republic's nobility, Noelle could believe it.
This nation is rotten to its core. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she peeled her hands away from her face. She peered up at Loic. If she accepted his proposal, Leon would be saved. If she refused, Loic would just keep pulling stunts like his until she caved.
I guess it's impossible to oppose the nobility. No, that's not it. It's the Sacred Tree that we can't oppose.
Its power was absolute. Noelle resigned herself to it.
But as one of the last members of House Lespinasse, I'll never let go of my grudge.
It was like the tree itself had refused to ever release her.
Noelle steeled herself to accept Loic's proposal—but before she could, Louise strode in and slapped him across the face.
"Louise, what are you—augh!"
She smacked him again. "Quit with your conniving already," she spat. "You really are a lowlife, trying to manipulate a duel to get your hands on her. Is this really how you think the next head of House Barielle ought to conduct himself?"
"Louise, you should know better than to interfere in things that don't concern you."
"I'm merely telling you not to disrupt the duel. Are you under some sort of illusion that Pierre would stop if you told him to? Or are you actually his accomplice? If *that's* the case, I really will crush you."
The rest of the crowd were starting to stare. Since Narcisse was there too, and was Louise's ally at present, Loic was at a disadvantage. With that in mind, he took the safer course of action and retreated.
"Th-thank you," said Noelle.
"I didn't do it for you," said Louise. "I just didn't want him getting in the way of this duel. Leon seems to have some kind of plan."
There was a clear power differential at play, but Leon hadn't given up hope.
Noelle eyed Louise suspiciously. "Why are you so hung up on Leon?"
Louise didn't answer.
"It's odd enough that the princess of House Rault would stick up for an exchange student," said Noelle. "But it's even stranger that you saved me from Loic. You hate me, and it wouldn't have affected Leon's fight if I'd

agreed to go with Loic. The nobility would still have gotten their hands on the sapling."

Louise crossed her arms and dug her nails into her skin. "I don't owe you an answer."

Did Louise have some kind of scheme in mind? No, from the look of things, she was genuinely concerned for Leon's well-being. The only problem was that Noelle couldn't figure out *why*.

As the battle wore on, an airbike zoomed into the stands and touched down. Jilk was at the controls, with Carla and Elle behind him. The audience erupted into shouting. Jilk had to yell to make himself heard.

"Earl Bartfort! Miss Marie saved Miss Carla and the dog!"

"Please kick that man's butt!" Carla added.

"Woof!" Elle barked in agreement.

Down in the arena, Leon raised a fist in acknowledgment.

"Now I have no reason to hold back," he snarled at Pierre, despite his clear disadvantage. "Are you ready?"

"Losing a few hostages makes no difference!" Pierre snapped back. "Are you too stupid to realize you're outmatched?!"

"Pierre, you truly have underestimated him," Louise scoffed.

"Let me tell you something for free," Leon said, his voice reverberating through the arena. "I'm actually a coward."

Chapter 11:
Leon's Turn

"I'M ACTUALLY a coward."

The moment I professed that, the entire arena fell silent. Even Pierre shut up for a moment before he descended back into his usual raving.

"You're really going to start begging for your life? It's too late!"

"What part of that sounded like begging?" I snorted. "All I said was I'm a coward. Can your little brain not comprehend that?"

"Enough. You're a dead man!"

"Yeah, yeah. You're a real good yapper. Maybe you should take some lessons from Elle. She's a good girl. Barely barks at all."

My goading set him off again—he came in swinging his scythe, trying to slice me in half.

Marie and her morons had saved the hostages. I had no more reasons to hold back, and one of the final participants in my ploy was doubtless about to make their move soon.

"Quit making fun of me!" Pierre howled.

I stooped to avoid his attack and ducked between Arroganz's legs. As I passed, I tapped the Armor lightly with my hand.

It toppled.

"Ow!" Pierre hissed from within the cockpit. The fall had rattled him. "D-dammit! This stupid Armor fell over. How dare a piece of junk embarrass me!"

Hah! He thought Arroganz had failed him.

"It didn't trip on its own," I said. "I *made* you trip."

"Huh?" Pierre blurted in disbelief. I could hear the real question on his mind: *What are you talking about?*

I couldn't blame him for being baffled.

"I told you," I said. "I'm a coward. I only fight battles I can win."

"What do you...?"

"You still don't get it? I *knew* I could beat you. That's why I agreed to the fight. I knew you would use Arroganz and that I would have to battle unarmed. But I still knew I could win. That's the only reason I'm here."

"What?! Hah! It was just a trip. Don't get carried away!" Pierre pulled himself back to his feet and lunged into another attack.

But as Arroganz reached for me, I grabbed one of its fingers and tossed it into the air. It was like something straight out of a comic book—the whole Armor rolled across the arena, rattling Pierre around in the cockpit.

"B-baaastard!" he screamed.

I stared down at the fallen robot and rolled my shoulders. "You really are a worm. The fact that you can't even win in that Armor is proof that you have

negative talent. Oh, silly me. That's not it. It's that you're a fundamental failure as a human being."

"That was just a fluke! Don't think it'll happen again!"

As Pierre got up once more, I closed in on him and used my momentum to slam my fist against Arroganz's shell. It staggered.

"Third time's the charm. You can't keep calling it a fluke, Pierre. Best just admit that you can't beat me."

***

The spectators could scarcely believe their eyes. What exactly was going on down there? This tiny human kept throwing that massive robot around as though it were nothing. Some people had even started to applaud.

"With his bare hands?" Narcisse asked. "Is that even possible? Is it some manner of martial arts technique? Or is he using some kind of magic?" As shocked as he was, it only fueled his curiosity.

"Just focus on the match," Louise scolded.

"I know, I know. But Leon's still at a disadvantage, isn't he?"

Despite this new development, Narcisse was still anxious. After all, Pierre remained tucked safely inside an Armor, and Leon was as yet unarmed. As if that wasn't bad enough, Leon was surely exhausted. Moreover, he was taking advantage of Arroganz's momentum to hurl it through the air, but there was nothing he could do if it stood still.

"He needs a backup plan," Louise said.

She was worried too. No matter how much she wanted to declare Leon the victor, right now he was just slinging the robot around. Before she could recognize him as the victor, he needed a finishing move. Otherwise the crowd would question her judgment, and that might invalidate his win. No, Leon *needed* a clean, decisive victory.

Narcisse glanced at her. "Louise, he's not your little brother."

She dropped her gaze. "I know."

"Then don't get too invested. He's not from here. No matter what happens, he will go home eventually."

"You don't have to remind me."

As they talked, the most unexpected thing happened. Clement raced over to Narcisse, wheezing and covered in sweat. His expression was grim.

"Narcy!"

"Professor Clement? What's the matter?"

Narcisse assumed that Pierre had caused another mess, but he never could have prepared himself for the truth.

"House Feivel is under attack. It's a battlefield over there!"

"What did you say?" Narcisse gaped.

Louise shook her head. "What do you mean they're under attack? We haven't heard anything about that."

Given the current political situation, it was hard to believe that anyone would launch an invasion against one of the Six Great Houses of the republic.

Clement glanced down into the arena as Leon sent Pierre flying again. “My apologies. It’s an unconfirmed report, but from what I heard, the enemy is a single Holfortian ship. Although…I believe it is currently owned by a citizen of the Alzer Republic.”

Leon flipped Arroganz again, and cheers of applause rained down from the stands. Pierre’s lack of popularity spoke for itself.

“One ship? You mean Leon’s? Has it gone out of control?”

Clement clapped a hand to his cheek and wiggled bashfully. “Oh my, I have no idea. I don’t even know if it’s true. But there is *definitely* a battle breaking out over House Feivel’s lands. The republic has deployed its fleet. We should stop this duel and get everyone to safety.”

Narcisse frowned. “I can’t believe this is happening.” Had the *Einhorn* really gone so berserk that it was attacking its owners’ territory?

“I can’t watch this anymore,” said Louise. “By the authority of my name, I will put an end to it.”

“All right,” said Narcisse. “Let’s announce the cancellation.”

As they made their decision, Pierre’s frenzied cry echoed across the arena.

“Don’t you dare make fun of me!” he yelled at the crowd. “I’ll turn you all to dust!”

A container on Arroganz’s back opened and fired missiles into the stands.

Louise gasped. “That worm!”

Narcisse and Clement stood awestruck. Pierre wasn’t just attacking Leon anymore, he was after the spectators! The shield around the arena lit up as the missiles struck, but it wasn’t strong enough to withstand the ensuing explosion. It had protected the crowd, but now it shattered, and smoke poured into the stands.

***

Sometime earlier, just as the duel began, the *Einhorn* left its dock in the harbor. One of Pierre’s lackeys noticed the scenery slipping past the window and thought it was odd, but he wasn’t too alarmed.

“Is someone piloting the ship without permission? Or did Mr. Pierre give the order?” His head pounded with a hangover. He yawned and shuffled down one of the *Einhorn*’s corridors. “And where is everyone?”

No one else seemed to be on board.

The man walked until he came upon a robot. The robots managed the ship without the need for a crew. The legless robot hovered in the air, holding a broom. He approached it and slammed his foot into the machine.

“Hey, where are my buddies at?”

Pierre’s goons had all been particularly vicious toward the robots. Normally, the machines never uttered a complaint, but today was different. The robot turned toward him, its red eye shining.

“What’s your problem? Hurry up and show me where they are.”

The robot brought its broom down on his head.

“Y-you little bastard! You dare defy me?!”

As the robot continued to beat him, the man pulled out a dagger. He lunged at the machine—and therefore he sensed the presence behind him too late.

“Huh…?”

An even bigger robot loomed over him. It normally dealt with miscellaneous chores, but now it raised its two thick arms and slammed them down on the man’s head, plunging him into darkness.

***

Luxion hovered around the *Einhorn*’s bridge, giving orders to the robots bustling under him.

“We’re entering the next phase. Our destination is House Feivel.”

Pierre’s lackeys were tied up and lying on the floor. They could do nothing to stop the *Einhorn* as it headed for the center of House Feivel’s territory. Sadly, a security ship blocked its path.

“Please stop right there,” they called politely.

The security ship’s crew had seen the Feivel crest plastered across the *Einhorn*. More importantly, Luxion recognized the voice blasting over the loudspeaker.

“If Master were here, I’m sure he would call this ‘karmic whiplash,’ wouldn’t he?”

It was the same captain who’d frisked them when they first arrived. Considering how rude he’d been about Arroganz, Luxion was keen to serve up some ice-cold revenge.

“Fire.”

At Luxion’s command, the robots locked and launched a missile. The enemy vessel faltered in the sky, disabled and sinking slowly. As it erupted in flames, everyone on board began to flee. The captain was the first to rush for an escape pod.

“Continue firing.”

The *Einhorn* launched more missiles, hitting the captain’s escape pod. It plummeted toward the ground, although Luxion had calculated the attack to ensure the captain wouldn’t be killed. That didn’t stop the man from screaming and sobbing as he fell. Luxion considered that revenge enough. After all, killing wasn’t exactly Leon’s “style.”

“It certainly is hard work, tailoring this little performance to Master’s tastes.”

Luxion dismissed the sinking enemy ship and advanced toward House Feivel.

Some of Pierre's lackeys had escaped capture and started beating on the door.
"Hey, what's going on in there?!"
"You've gone too far! Take this ship back to the harbor!"
"Did Mr. Pierre really order this?! H-hey, what's wrong with the robots? St-stop it! Don't come any closer!"
Luxion tuned them out.
Once the *Einhorn* entered House Feivel's lands, he began systematically destroying crucial locations, especially military facilities. But the fallen security vessel had apparently called for backup, because now enemy ships were everywhere. However, when they saw House Feivel's crest on the *Einhorn*, they neglected to open fire.
"Get rid of them," Luxion commanded.
The ships went down one after the other. Luxion was careful to make sure they wouldn't crash into any buildings. After he'd dispensed with them, he fed prepared audio into the *Einhorn*'s megaphone.
"Bwa ha ha ha! No one's stronger than us!"
"Hah, take that! We'll destroy Mr. Pierre's enemies!"
"Let's head for the center of the region!"
The voices belonged to Pierre's minions. At least, in a way. Luxion had recorded the men, analyzed their voices, and edited together some key stock phrases. Outside the door, Pierre's followers were reeling.
"W-wait. What's going on here?!"
"Stop! Hey, enough of these games!"
"Open the door!"
They seemed to think this was a prank that had gone too far, but it was too late to undo the damage.
A voice boomed over the loudspeaker of one of the security ships. "You fools! Do you understand what you're doing? Men, ready your cannons! We need to hold this ship at bay until reinforcements arrive."
They fired at the *Einhorn*, but Luxion wasn't about to humor them.
"Sink them all."
It only took a few shots to take every one of them down.
Suddenly, ivy grew out of the seal on the *Einhorn*'s hull. The Sacred Tree was trying to destroy the ship for defying Pierre's will.
"That plant's certainly slow to react," said Luxion. "Does it honestly think such a petty maneuver will stop me?"
Multiple legless Armors deployed from the *Einhorn*, wielding chainsaws and flamethrowers. They burned and chopped at the roots and the ivy until lines lit up across the ship. After a moment, the Sacred Tree's seal fractured and faded away.
"If that was all the power you had, I could have gotten rid of you whenever I wanted."
Luxion slowed the ship, and once he'd destroyed everything of interest in Feivel's territory, he turned the vessel toward House Feivel's castle.

“There. No issues on my end. I wonder how Master is faring?”

***

Smoke filled the arena, obscuring Pierre’s vision as he gazed out of the cockpit, frantically jerking the controls. “Wh-what’s wrong with this thing? I didn’t do anything!”

He hadn’t known anything about the missiles stored on Arroganz’s back, and he certainly hadn’t fired them into the crowd. He didn’t care about harming the rabble, but Narcisse and Louise were nobility. He wouldn’t dare raise a hand against them.

And that wasn’t his only problem.

“Why can’t anyone hear what I’m saying?!” He was unable to broadcast his voice, but he heard someone speak who sounded exactly like him.

“I’ll turn you all to dust!”

As the fumes cleared, a number seals shone down from the stands. It wasn’t just Narcisse and Louise—other students associated with the Six Great Houses had also used them for protection.

“N-no! It wasn’t me! I didn’t attack you!”

Pierre bullied those below him, but he didn’t want to fight his equals—especially not when there were so many of them. He knew he would lose if he tried, so he never did so.

“Bwa ha ha ha! You’re all scared little chickens!”

He listened to the sound of his own voice, taunting the crowd.

“Stop!” Pierre hollered. “Quit it right now!”

He pulled at the controls, but they were locked in place.

Then a robotic voice echoed through the cockpit. “We’re entering the next phase of our strategy.”

“Wh-what? What strategy?! Hey, One-Eye! Can you hear me? Obey my orders! Hey! You better answer me!”

This time, it was Luxion’s voice that filled the cockpit. “Yes, what is it?”

“You bastard, what have you been doing this whole time? This piece of crap is moving on its own! Make it stop! You better have a good excuse for Narcisse and Louise. This isn’t my fault!”

“And?”

“Wh-what?!”

Luxion’s reaction was completely unlike his prior deference. He was ice-cold.

“Y-you stupid piece of junk!” Pierre shrieked. “I’ll turn you to scrap. Same goes for this Armor! It couldn’t even kill Leon, and he’s a total waste of space. You’ve humiliated me!”

“You seem to have gotten the wrong impression.”

“Explain yourself!”

“My master—my *only* master—is Leon Fou Bartfort.”

“What are you…?”

“You were never worthy of me. The only ‘waste of space’ here is you.”
Pierre ground his teeth. His face contorted into an ugly, hateful expression.
“I’ll never forget this. Someday, I’ll kill you, I swear!”
“Absurd. If you cannot kill my master, then you certainly cannot kill me. At least you provided me with data. For that, I shall retract my earlier statement about your uselessness. I apologize.”
“You stupid scrap metal!”
“You shouldn’t have made light of my master.”
Pierre let out a shrill cry from the cockpit, cursing both Leon and Luxion for their deception.
Outside, Leon stood in front of the giant robot and grinned.

***

As the smoke began to dissipate, I stood steadfast before Arroganz.
“Arroganz! I’m taking you back now.”
Everyone in the stands was scrambling to escape.
“Leon, run!” Noelle hollered through the crowd. “Pierre has lost his mind!”
I didn’t believe that for a second. For all his bravado, Pierre was a wimp, full of ambitions he could never hope to achieve. He didn’t have a backbone—all he had was an unconscious inferiority complex about anyone on equal footing with him. That was why he went after weaker targets—he needed to feel superior. At the end of the day, he was more cowardly than I was.
Phew. Now that we’ve come this far, I can finally relax.
Arroganz whipped its ominous-looking scythe through the air.
“I’ll cut you down, obtain that sapling, and become the king of this country!” The disgusting, maniacal laughter that followed sounded just like Pierre.
“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that with *my* Armor, Pierre. This ends now!” I grinned, looking every bit the dapper hero.
In reality, all of this was a ruse. Armors were basically flying tanks. No way could an ordinary person match one. This duel? It was an act. I was no martial artist, and I could never fling Arroganz through the air with my own two hands. Ordinarily, I would never even attempt to charge into battle so recklessly.
But I knew I’d win!
If Pierre had brought a normal Armor, I would have been in a lot of trouble. I was truly grateful to him for striding in with Arroganz.
“Pierre!” Miss Louise shouted. “Enough of this nonsense! By my authority as a witness, I am suspending this duel!”
“Go ahead and try it!” Pierre’s voice shouted back. “If you do, I’ll kill this bastard and steal the sapling for myself. No one can stop me!”
Louise gaped. “Do you not recognize the oath you made to the Sacred Tree?!” She shook her head, flabbergasted, and turned to me. “Leon, hurry up and get out of there!”

“Too late now!” Pierre cut in. “It’s time to die, you waste of space!”
I took a fighting stance with my palm held outward, ready to strike. “Bring it, Pierre!”
Everyone left in the crowd was shouting at me to flee.
Ah, what heartwarming support. Back home, everyone had showered me with curses. By comparison, the Alzerians were the epitome of compassion.
Arroganz brought the giant scythe swinging down, and the blade sunk into the ground.
“This is…the end!”
I evaded the strike and slipped in close, thrusting my palm toward Arroganz’s chest.



Normally, punching an Armor would cause barely any damage, but when I struck Arroganz's cockpit, the globe on its chest lit up. It dropped the enormous scythe as it was thrown back by the blast and slammed into the outer wall of the arena.

Silence fell over the stands.

I waltzed over to my fallen Armor, and the hatch to the cockpit cracked open.

Pierre glared out at me. "You bastard, you tricked me—ugh!"

I threw a punch straight into his mouth. "Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this duel is still on!"

Tears sprang to his eyes as he pressed a hand over his mouth. I grabbed him by the hair and dragged him out of the cockpit, throwing him down onto the arena floor.

"And now we're on an equal footing!" I grinned. *The best is yet to come!*

Pierre hauled himself to his feet and launched a torrent of curses. "You conniving loser! You led me into a trap. You third-rate garbage knight! How dare you! I am a great lord. I hail from one of the Six Great Houses! The Sacred Tree chose me! You won't get away with this. I'll show you what happens when you mess with someone as great as—augh!"

His little rant was dragging on, so I swung my fist at him. The glove that Luxion had prepared for me was perfect. My hand didn't even hurt as I pummeled Pierre.

I'll have to thank him later.

Pierre pressed his hand over his mouth as blood poured out. His entire body trembled. One of his teeth fell into the dirt.

"My tooth! My toooooth!"

I cracked my knuckles and grinned. "Oh, don't worry. Remember how badly you hurt Brad? His teeth grew right back. Magic sure is incredible, isn't it? So really, your injuries are nothing."

He glowered at me and thrust out his right hand. His crest began to glow.

"Oh? Are you trying to use the Sacred Tree's protection? Guess you forgot the rules of this duel."

"Ugh!" Even Pierre hesitated to break his oath to that tree.

"I'm going to take revenge for everything you did to us," I said. "You better not give up too easily. I have a whole list of reasons to pummel you."

"Y-you dare to punch me?! This will come back to bite you, I swear! I'll wipe out your home. I'll kill your whole family! You'll see what happens when you make an enemy of House Feivel!"

"Oh, I'm shaking in my boots."

When the crowd saw how quickly Pierre fell back on threats once he was cornered, they turned on him.

"What a sleazebag. He's seriously going to bring his family into this just because he's going to lose?"

"How did he even end up in this state? He had an Armor!"

"Can't believe he's about to lose after all that…"

Pierre whipped around to sling insults back at them. “Silence, you worms! You worthless insects should be grateful. The only reason you’re allowed to live here is because of us—the Six Great Houses! You’re nothing but a bunch of parasites. How *dare* you degrade me!”

The crowd grew colder. I clapped a hand on Pierre’s shoulder and yanked him around to face me. I smacked him with my right hook, and cheers rang out through the stands.

Wow. They seriously hate his guts.

“Not a good idea, getting distracted in the middle of a duel. I consider myself a kind person, but I never show mercy to my enemies.”

“What are you—argh!”

I grabbed his hair and bashed him with my fist. Most of my punches were aimed at his face. Once I made sure he couldn’t talk, then the real show could begin.

“What’s wrong? Why don’t you try to fight back, huh?!”

Pierre’s arrogant facade began to crumble. He started blubbering, “St-stop!” and “E-enough of this!” and “F-fine, I won’t use my family’s power against you!”

He really had no experience getting thrashed. After all, he’d only ever picked on those below him.

By the time I let go of his hair, his face was an absolute mess.

“Ah hill amish dehea—”

It seemed like he was trying to say something. Most likely, “I will admit defeat,” or something to that effect, but I chose to mishear him.

“Oh, you want to keep going? I would expect no less from one of the Six Great Houses! I respect your guts. Hiyah!”

“Ish huuursh!”

I had learned some martial arts at the academy, but honestly? Pierre was more of a weakling than anyone I’d ever faced. This felt like a joke. I took a couple of jabs at his chest, and he hissed in agony.

“Sht-shtop…”

“Incredible, Pierre! Even after all of this, you’re still standing!”

That clearly made him think I’d quit if he fell over, because when I punched him again, he toppled. He stretched out his hand toward Professor Narcisse, hoping that the observers would come to his aid. Before he could plead for help, I plopped down on top of him and started raining down punches.

“What, you thought it was over? Too bad. I won’t let you get away that easily!”

I pummeled him so badly that he couldn’t even admit defeat. His front teeth were knocked out, and he was sobbing, trying to shield his face with his arms. I aimed for whatever openings I could get and continued to whale on him. The duel was completely one-sided at this point, but the crowd kept cheering.

"They absolutely loathe you," I remarked. "I mean, I'm practically bullying you here. I never expected them to cheer like this."

Pierre sobbed, "Pease haff mershy. Ah hill amish deheat, ah shear!"

Sounds like he's saying, "Please have mercy. I will admit defeat, I swear."

I slammed my fist into his face again. My heart should have ached for a fellow human being, but this guy was a total sleazeball. I didn't feel an ounce of remorse.

"What did you do to the people who begged *you* for mercy? Do you think you're some kind of special case? You're in for a rude awakening. But hey, at least this was a good life lesson, right?" I walloped him in the nose. Blood came spraying out, but I still didn't stop. "You know what, you make for an excellent punching bag! Even now, I don't feel even a pinch of regret. In fact, I feel like I'm exacting justice!"

If I had to compliment him for anything, it would be how easy it was to punch him without guilt. In the stands, the crowd was still cheering me on. I felt like some kind of hero.

But I'm definitely not!

"How does it feel getting a taste of your own medicine, huh?"

"Ah shear ah hill bake hu hey hor dis," Pierre muttered.

"I swear I will make you pay for this," hm? Guess I haven't crushed his spirit yet. Kinda impressive. He really is the perfect villain.

"That's it, Pierre! Keep fighting back!"

Chapter 12:
The One-Horned Beast

THE ATMOSPHERE in the stands had taken a turn, and the crowd was fully committed. Surprised at the shift, Noelle watched Leon whale on Pierre. Spectators returned as they realized it was safe, inching closer to get a glimpse of Leon's performance. Soon, Noelle was surrounded by onlookers.

I can't believe no one has tried to stop this.

It made sense, given everything Pierre had done. But it was more than that. *He's channeling all the resentment people feel toward the Six Great Houses.*

Leon was a lightning rod for revolt against the ruling class. He lacked the Sacred Tree's divine protection, but he was still making short work of Pierre. That was why the crowd was so abnormally invested. Leon had broken through the insurmountable wall between the republic's haves and have-nots.

While Noelle was busy watching, someone grabbed her by the arm.

"Lelia?" Noelle gasped as she whipped around to face her sister. Lelia's hair was a disheveled mess, not least because she'd had to push her way through the crowd.

"Come with me for a sec!" said Lelia.

"But the match isn't over."

"We have bigger problems!" Panic-stricken, Lelia tugged at her sister until Noelle left her seat. "There's a war raging outside!"

Wait, hadn't Clement said something about that? Noelle turned her gaze to Narcisse. He was discussing something with a small group of people. They glanced down into the arena, looking confused.

Lelia was more flustered than Noelle had ever seen her. "Those morons have made a complete mess out of everything. If I don't do something soon…"

Noelle shook herself free. Lelia stared at her in confusion. "Sis?"

Noelle turned on her heel and headed back to her seat. "I'm going to watch the rest of Leon's duel."

"Sis!" Lelia called after her. "Don't get too close to those guys! They're…!"

***

"Whew, I'm exhausted." I stepped away from Pierre, finally tired from all the punching. "I'm amazed you don't wear yourself out doing this. Do you get *that* much energy from bullying?"

Pierre was lying at my feet, so I gave his head a swift kick. He mumbled something under his breath.

"What are you muttering about?" I cackled. "Guess it doesn't matter."

“I declare Leon Fou Bartfort the victor!” Narcisse’s voice boomed across the arena. “Someone, send for medical help!”
A nurse and a doctor in a white coat rushed to Pierre’s side and began checking him over.
“These are some hideous wounds.”
“We should be quick.”
They applied healing magic and set about administering emergency first aid while Pierre grimaced in agony. The doctor was good; Pierre’s face already looked nearly normal. An armed group flooded in to surround him. Pierre apparently thought they were allies, because he immediately resumed his haughty attitude.
You’re as transparent as glass.
Professor Narcisse and Miss Louise raced down from the stands and approached, just in time to hear Pierre’s protests.
“Narcisse! It was him! He’s a cheating bastard! He led me into a trap!”
But Narcisse dismissed his claims. “Enough. You shame yourself, Pierre. Furthermore, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”
It was finally time for all of Pierre’s posturing to come back and bite him square in the ass.
Narcisse’s nostrils flared. “Why are you attacking your own family? The combined fleet of the republic had to intervene.”
“What…?” Pierre stared at Narcisse like a deer in headlights.
“Your impropriety during the duel was bad enough,” Miss Louise added angrily. “But *this* is irredeemable. As much as we would like to send you in for an immediate interrogation, you need to stop your ship first—or rather, the ship you stole from Leon.”
Pierre gaped at her, as though he didn’t understand a word she was saying. “N-no! I don’t know anything about this. I’m innocent! It was him! He trapped me. He did it!”
Pierre stabbed his finger toward me.
I grinned at him. “Seriously? Aren’t *you* the owner of that ship? Speaking of which, I think it’s time for you to fulfill your promise.”
Professor Narcisse frowned. “Leon, this isn’t the time. Pierre’s subordinates have commandeered your ship. Enough damage has been done. Please, tell us what you know of its weaknesses.”
My smile faded. Some of those around me shifted, sensing the change in my demeanor.
“You want me to cooperate? One of your people stole my ship, did unspeakable things to me and my countrymen, and you want me to *cooperate*? Let’s cut the bullshit, shall we? I won the duel. And Pierre? That means you *will* bring me the *Einhorn*. Immediately.”
A vein popped on Pierre’s forehead. “I already told you,” he snarled. “I don’t know anything—”
He stalled, turning pale as he finally realized his situation.
“What?” I asked. “You can’t bring it here? Did you forget your oath?”

Pierre trembled. “I-I swear I’ll bring it back. R-really! Just wait a little while! I promise you. I’ll do anything you want! Anything! Just give me some time!”

Realization dawned on Miss Louise’s face. She glanced over at me. “Don’t tell me…”

Sadly, it was already too late.

“Gonna beg for mercy, huh? And how did you generally respond to people who begged you? Not that it matters. You’ve pissed off the Sacred Tree now!”

Pierre had broken the terms of his oath. If he lost, he was supposed to return what he’d taken—*immediately*. The Sacred Tree wasn’t about to let this indiscretion go unpunished. A glowing red circle appeared beneath him, and the other Alzerians pulled away. Even Louise and Narcisse retreated. Only I remained, staring down into the circle.

“So, this is what happens when you anger the Sacred Tree,” I mused. Marie had mentioned as much in the notes she’d written for me. As for what would happen next…

“No! Please noooo!”

Pierre wailed and scrambled away. He was trying to escape, but ivy shot out of the ground and wrapped around his ankles, dragging him back in. Pierre clawed at the dirt, trying to find purchase.

“Please!” he sobbed. “Please have mercy! I’ll never do it again! I won’t ever disappoint you, I swear! Just don’t take it from me! I don’t want to live without your blessing!”

Miss Louise closed her eyes and turned away, while Narcisse stared at Pierre with horrified curiosity. Meanwhile, I was grinning like a fool.

“Give it up, Pierre. You’ve lost.”

Ivy crawled up his body, twisting around his right hand. Snot and tears poured down Pierre’s face, but he could only watch. “Somebody save me! Anybody!”

He was terrified of the red circle. It was a symbol of fear for anyone who carried a crest on their hand. After all, this circle robbed them of their divine blessing.

Once it was over, the ivy wilted, and the circle disappeared. Pierre lay there in a heap, weeping.

I stepped closer and peered down at his right hand. The crest was gone. I put a hand on his shoulder and kneeled down to whisper in his ear. “Do you realize why this happened?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

“It’s because you picked a fight with me.”

Pierre peered up at me.

“I would never have gone this far if you had just let us go about our lives,” I said. “I did this because *you* started it, although I’m sure I’ll find a way to put this experience to good use. Oh, I almost forgot. One more thing: You played the part of village idiot well. I know I was entertained.”

I grinned, and Pierre’s expression contorted with grief and tears.

Miss Louise ventured over. “Leon, you’re even more rotten than I thought you were.” Despite her tone, it didn’t sound like she blamed me for any of this. “Well, what now? Can you stop your ship from wreaking havoc? If you can’t, we’ll have no choice but to destroy it.”

Yeah, good luck with that. Luxion would gleefully dispatch every last one of your ships that tried anything.

I glanced at Arroganz, still covered with Pierre’s hideous decor. “Well, guess I’ll give it a shot.”

If I didn’t intervene soon, Luxion would get carried away. And that could only spell more trouble.

***

As the *Einhorn* cruised over Feivel territory, several airships blocked its path. They turned sideways, training their cannons on the rogue vessel, but the *Einhorn* sank them all long before it entered their range. An enormous castle loomed behind the republic’s fleet—the stronghold of House Feivel. The Alzerian ships were desperate to protect it.

Luxion floated on the *Einhorn*’s bridge, using gaps in the enemy’s formation to hurl fire at the castle.

“Only targeting areas with no biosignals is exhausting,” he complained.

The castle had deployed its own forces, which joined the republic’s fleet to take the *Einhorn* down. Luxion intercepted their transmissions.

“Our cannon fire isn’t reaching the enemy ship!”

“It’s hard to believe the kingdom is so powerful! Do they have Precious Orbs on board?”

“Can’t believe Feivel’s own second son would do something so foolish!”

Their conversation confirmed that they regarded the *Einhorn* as Pierre’s property. Perfect.

Through an outside camera, Luxion had a good view of the castle. The lord of the house was fleeing like a coward. Luxion fired a cannon near his location, just to intimidate him, but the man used his crest to block it.

“The Sacred Tree’s seal can do that too, hm? How intriguing. And what’s this?”

The fleet was moving as well, making way for an enormous vessel that surged toward the *Einhorn*.

“Their flagship is moving in? Well, it’s not the most efficient use of their resources, but they must feel it’s the only way to take the *Einhorn* down. Not that I mind what they throw at me.”

The republic flagship was a behemoth, at least a thousand meters long.

“I don’t care how you do it,” barked its commander. “Sink that thing! We can’t let a single ship take down the entire fleet!”

Ah, yes, they’re all so convinced that they’re impervious to invasion, Luxion recalled. He had conducted an in-depth investigation into the matter.

“All of their ships are equipped with a component the kingdom lacks,” he said. “I assume it allows them to harness energy from the Sacred Tree. Yes, that adds up. Their ships have an abundance of power.”
Ships in this world relied on Suspension Stones to power their engines. The republic’s ships had no such stones, however, and instead opted for a far more powerful source of fuel. This increased their capacity for weapons and ammunition and could also be utilized to create a defensive shield.
So long as Alzerian ships were fighting inside their own borders, they were strong. However, when they invaded other nations, their ships were too far out of range to receive the Sacred Tree’s energy and thus lost that valuable advantage.
Their Armors likely worked the same way. The suits that they deployed against Luxion were more impressive than the ones in the kingdom, but his drones still took them down with ease.
“This is all you have?” Luxion lost interest, and he guided the *Einhorn* to face down the enemy’s flagship. “Hmph, let’s charge.”
They drew closer, and the flagship launched a number of small lifeboats as its crew fled for safety. The horn protruding from the *Einhorn*’s bow was designed to look like a unicorn’s, but it wasn’t just for decoration. It stabbed into the enemy ship, slicing it open.
“The *Einhorn* is no mere ship. Your forces cannot compare.”
The republic had earned Luxion’s resentment from the first inspection it forced upon the *Einhorn* when he and his master first arrived. Now, he redirected all that anger back at them. The flagship was five times larger than the *Einhorn*, but the *Einhorn* pierced through it. The *Einhorn* swayed back and forth, sawing the other vessel in half horizontally. Even after the flagship was sunk, the rampage didn’t end. Luxion turned on the lifeboats.
Then an explosion lit up the sky, but the *Einhorn* slipped out from the flames without a scratch. People screamed in horror.
“That didn’t damage it at all!”
“Quick! Deploy more ships!”
“We have to stop it! It’s only one ship!”
While the republic fleet continued their onslaught, Luxion’s attention was drawn elsewhere. His drones had retrieved a faintly green Precious Orb from the flagship.
“Ah yes,” said Luxion. “This will make a fine souvenir for Master.”

***

From the safety of a lifeboat, the commander of the republic’s fleet watched his flagship go down in flames. His face contorted in despair as he stared wide-eyed at the *Einhorn*.
“What *is* that ship? Some kind of monster?”
He was consumed with grief. Who could have thought he’d be in charge of the fleet on the day their winning streak ended? It would have been one

thing if they'd lost to a ship of the republic, but this monstrosity had been built in Holfort.
"Now there's nothing that can stop it…" he mumbled.
With their flagship gone, they had no defenses left and no way to put an end to this menace.
Just as he gave up hope, a small ship sailed onto the battlefield.
"What's that?"
"Commander," a subordinate with a communicator reported. "It's Lady Louise of House Rault. She says they will put a stop to the enemy vessel!"
A black Armor lifted off from the deck of the small ship and soared through the sky, heading straight for the *Einhorn*. Several drones crowded around it, but the Armor kicked them away and landed safely. A boy leaped out onto the *Einhorn*'s deck. How had me managed to board the enemy vessel so easily? The republic's forces hadn't even been able to get close!
The commander sighed and pulled his hat down over his face. "It's too late now. We're already defeated."
One only needed to glance down at the sea of flaming wreckage below to see how many of their ships had been sunk.
"O Sacred Tree, bring your divine justice down upon that monster."

***

As I stepped onto the *Einhorn*'s deck, Luxion was waiting for me. A number of drones were lined up on either side of him, and his red eye fixed on me.
"If you had only given me five more minutes, I could have destroyed House Feivel's stronghold in its entirety."
I chuckled. "You haven't changed at all. Anyway, now that you've served Pierre, do you finally appreciate me? You really are lucky to have such an amazing master, you know."
"I will admit Pierre was terrible. To borrow a human term, you might say that he disgusted me so much that I wanted to gag. Although I would like to remind you that all of this was your fault."
"You're the one who decided to side with him," I said. "It had nothing to do with me."
I set off walking, and Luxion took up his usual place over my shoulder.
"It was the most effective solution," he said. "Not that I expect you to understand. However, thanks to my reconnaissance, I managed to get quite a bit of information out of Pierre."
The *Einhorn*'s corridors were far messier than when I'd left. Luxion had kept up with the cleaning, but many of the decorations and fittings were suspiciously missing.
"It looks like a bunch of pirates came through here," I said.
"Well, more than half of them *were* air pirates, so you're not entirely wrong."
"I don't even know how to respond to that."

As surprising as it was to learn what kind of people Pierre considered friends, I had to turn my attention to other matters. I accepted the shotgun the drones had loaded for me, filled with nonlethal bullets.
“So, did you learn anything interesting?” I asked.
“Yes. I was able to get a good look at the republic’s internal affairs.”
“Glad to hear it.”
“What are your plans now?” Luxion asked.
Beating Pierre bloody had been merely a sideshow. The republic itself was the main attraction.
“I’m going to teach Alzer a little lesson about how vast the world really is,” I said. “Although of course they’ll have to pay me for my time and attention.”
“To clarify,” said Luxion, “you mean to use vastly superior technology—in other words, me—to ‘teach’ the Alzer Republic a lesson, yes? I fail to see how this makes you any different from them.”
“I’m just taking them down a peg. Once they realize they’re not top dog, maybe they’ll start behaving better.”
“You truly enjoy lording my power over these people, don’t you?”
“Sure do. It’s the best feeling in the world.”
Finally, we arrived in the storage hangar, where Pierre’s subordinates were all tied up and waiting. They really had made a mess of the place.
“Filthy rats, turning my ship into a garbage dump. We’ll have to charge them extra for this.”
The majority of them shrank away as I walked in, but a few glared at me.
“Oh? Looking for a fight, huh?”
One of them leaped to his feet. Even with his arms still bound, he tried to threaten me. “You bastard, how dare you—”
I had heard enough of this kind of nonsense. I fired my shotgun, and he collapsed to the floor, cringing in pain.
“Shut up,” I said. “And be glad! I’ve beaten your boss, Pierre. He cried like a little weenie, and he no longer has the protection of the Sacred Tree. Congratulations! He can’t protect you anymore.”
The group exchanged looks and muttered to each other.
“This is why I was against this whole thing from the start.”
“I don’t remember you complaining before!”
“W-well, what do we do now?”
I fired another shot into the air to shut them all up.
“Um, e-excuse me?” one of them said. He was wearing an academy uniform and had the sniveling face of someone who was used to sucking up to others. “I don’t have anything to do with these other guys. Could you help me out? If you do, I swear I’ll make it worth your while.”
I glanced at Luxion for confirmation.
“He’s lying. He was the first one to jump in to hurt Jean and Brad.”
The boy’s face contorted with rage. “You stupid familiar!”
I fired my shotgun at him. Everyone else fell silent.
“You can make your excuses to the republic bigwigs,” I spat.

“Master,” said Luxion. “A republic ship is approaching. They are demanding to board. What would you like to do?”
“Threaten to sink them if they try it.”
Pierre’s subordinates trembled.
“Now,” I said sweetly. “I’m not going to kill you, but I *am* going to hurt you. A lot. No complaints there, right? You’ve already screwed over plenty of people, so you must have known this was coming.”
I loaded up my shotgun and cocked it, turning the barrel toward them.
“You beat the crap out of Brad and poor Jean. It’s time to pay your debts.”
No matter how they screamed and wailed, I fired on them mercilessly.

***

The leaders of the Six Great Houses gathered for an emergency meeting at the temple to discuss the one-horned beast, the *Einhorn*.
“I cannot believe this.”
“You’re telling me our whole fleet lost to one kingdom ship?!”
“We need to examine this vessel immediately!”
It was hard to fathom how this one ship had managed to completely obliterate their defensive forces. The battle wasn’t over yet, but it was hardly exaggerating to call it a total loss.
Albergue, the acting chairman, wore a tense expression. “Lord Lambert, care to explain this?”
According to Lambert’s report, House Feivel had only recently claimed possession of the ship in question. No one had ever imagined it would pose this much of a threat. Lambert shook with rage, like a child throwing a temper tantrum.
“I’ll demand compensation from the kingdom! Do any of you realize how much damage my territory has sustained?! Not just my harbor—my ships, and even my military facilities have been destroyed! The republic should not stand for this!”
Fernand turned to Albergue. “This is getting us nowhere. How are negotiations going with the owner of the ship, Acting Chairman?”
And there was the rub.
“Not well.”
The *Einhorn*’s original (and now current) owner, Leon, had claimed that Pierre owned the ship at the time of the attack, so the damages it had caused had nothing to do with him. Furthermore, he claimed that he and the other exchange students were the real victims and that they expected compensation.
Albergue was having difficulty understanding why his daughter supported this man. *Louise, what in the world is going through your head?*
As the meeting continued, the five other leaders looked on in disgust as Lambert howled that none of this was his fault.

***

After the *Einhorn* stood down, I returned to Marie’s mansion to check on Elle, who was lying on her side in her bed.

“She’s not eating anymore, huh?”

Our biggest problem had been dealt with, but Elle was fast approaching the end of her life.

Luxion gazed down at her. “She’s lived longer than I anticipated. I’m surprised.”

Noelle slipped in beside me to check on the dog. “I wonder if Jean will make it in time.”

I’d sent Marie to the hospital to fetch him as soon as Elle stopped moving her legs.

“He’ll make it,” I said. “Marie might look useless, but she’s pretty good at healing magic.”

Although I’d already sent her to visit Jean several times, and he still hadn’t opened his eyes.

Suddenly, noise broke out behind us. The door flew open, and Jean raced in. He was still covered in bandages and wearing his hospital gown.

“Noelle!”

Noelle smiled and urged him over. “Jean, you made it! See, Elle, he came for you!”

Jean reached toward her, and Elle licked at his hand. He stroked her head, tears pouring from his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Noelle.”

“Odd that she seems to recognize him,” said Luxion. “Her eyes and nose have already shut down.”

“It’s love,” I said. “It makes my heart ache.” I should be happy that he made it, but part of me feels responsible for all this.

Jean’s face was a mess of tears, but Elle just lapped them away.

“Thank you, old girl, for everything.”

His words made my chest squeeze.

Luxion had allowed me to accomplish far more than I ever could on my own. As a result, I had more responsibilities than most.

It isn’t good to think like this. I was just an average guy. I couldn’t shoulder every problem in the world. It would have been arrogant to even try.

I slipped out of the room, and Luxion tagged along behind me. I was surprised he had that much tact. Noelle stood up to follow.

“Why don’t you stay with him?” I suggested.

“It’s fine. They need some time alone. It’s a family thing, after all.”

“Well, okay, I guess.”

I didn’t think it would be a problem if *she* stayed with Jean, but that wasn’t my decision. Noelle came with us as we left.

Chapter 13:
The Oblivious Protagonist

WE LEFT JEAN AND ELLE with each other, and I stepped out into the garden. Almost immediately, an exhausted Marie strode over with a sheaf of papers in her hands and promptly passed them over. Judging by how she continued to shrink away from me, I really had gone overboard with the threats.

"If you're tired from all the healing you've been doing, then go get some sleep," I told her.

"I-I couldn't relax until I handed this over."

I flipped through the papers she'd given me. They contained information about the black-market merchandise Pierre had sold.

"Oh?" said Luxion, taking a peek. "These detail Pierre's dealings with that shady merchant."

"He seriously kept records?" I asked.

"I assume that the merchant didn't fully trust Pierre," said Luxion. "I suspect he kept them as insurance."

"Huh, okay."

Amongst the things that Pierre had sold off were some Precious Orbs. Those items weren't supposed to leave the country, and a stiff punishment awaited anyone who sold them abroad.

"Now we've got even more to blackmail them with."

"Master, that look on your face isn't very becoming."

I shook my head, chuckling. "Can't help it. I was born this way. Sad how many people judge me for it."

Marie stole an anxious glance at me. "Um, Leon—I mean, Brother, er… Sir! I am so sorry!" She prostrated herself on the floor. "All these events were completely my fault. I will do better in the future, I swear! Please forgive me!"

I felt bad for scaring her so awfully. At least the collar around her neck had disappeared—the tree's curse was no longer in effect.

"Looks like you're free from the tree's grasp," I said.

She blinked up at me. "Huh?"

I offered her my hand. "Did you really think I was *that* angry with you?"

"Of course I did, ding-dong! You had that vicious look on your face."

I knew how old she really was, so hearing her use a cutesy expression like "ding-dong" made my skin crawl.

"Luxion told me that Pierre was the aggressor, end of story."

"What?!"

Luxion's eye bobbed up and down. "Yes, but there was still much we didn't know. I deemed it too dangerous to fight until we had more intel. It also provided the perfect opportunity to get close to Pierre. Thus, I infiltrated their ranks without notifying Master of my intentions."

Marie slumped to her knees. All of the tension suddenly drained from her body, and color returned to her face. “You should have told me that sooner! I was scared out of my mind!”

I tucked the paperwork under my arm. I stared down at her, and Marie gasped, her shoulders hitching.

It’s almost dizzying how quickly she cycles through different emotions.

“But hold up,” she said. “What’s going to happen to Pierre? Do you think he’ll come back to the academy? You beat him up pretty badly. Aren’t we risking war with the republic because of that?”

I’d worried about the same things, but Pierre had pushed me to my limits. Either way, it wasn’t going to end in war.

“We don’t have to worry about that. That’s why we showed them how powerful the *Einhorn* is. As for Pierre, I doubt we’ll see him again.”

“Isn’t that, like, a huge problem?! Don’t forget, he’s meant to meddle with the protagonist in the middle of the game!”

She had a point. His event determined who the protagonist ended up with, so it was pretty pivotal. However, I just couldn’t get behind forcing Noelle into a relationship she didn’t want. Better to let her live however she wanted, especially considering how close she was to Jean. And besides, we had a backup protagonist.

“Emile seems pretty earnest about Lelia.”

“He does seem genuinely interested in marrying her,” Luxion added, spelling it out in a way that was easy for Marie to understand. “Also, whether or not someone can inherit the Sacred Tree’s seal seems to be based on their bloodline.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since Noelle and Lelia are twins, either of them could become the Priestess.”

Even if Noelle was picked, that just meant Jean would have to become the Guardian instead.

He may not be one of the romanceable characters, but I’m sure it’ll all work out.

No matter how things went, the world would avoid annihilation.

Marie’s shoulders slumped with relief. “Oh, then I guess we’re out of the woods!”

I was glad Luxion had temporarily gone over to Pierre’s side. The information he’d extracted provided us with a much better understanding of the republic’s internal affairs.

“Only one thing still bothers me,” said Luxion.

“What’s that?”

But before he could answer, Noelle came dashing into the garden. “Leon!” The tearful look on her face said everything. Elle was gone.

***

“I appreciate you taking such good care of her,” Jean said, his eyes still red and puffy as he cradled the box of Elle’s ashes in his arms. “And for taking care of me. I swear I’ll find a way to pay you back for the hospital fees.”
I raked a hand through my hair. “No need.”
“But...”
“I’m gonna use this whole incident to make myself rich. So ridiculously rich that your fees will be chump change. Seriously, don’t worry.”
Jean frowned and dropped his gaze, smiling slowly. “You’re a kind person, Earl Bartfort.”
“Not sure I agree.”
Especially considering that I should have stepped in sooner. Paying Jean’s hospital bills seemed like the least I could do.
“You looked after Elle for me, so I can confidently say that you are.”
I cleared my throat. “Anyway, feel up to returning to the academy?”
“Yes. Although school is on break for a while. Um, a lot seems to have happened.”
Yep, and it’s basically all my fault.
At this very moment, the Six Great Houses were probably quibbling over what to do with me.
“It’ll all be taken care of soon enough,” I said. “You and Noelle…take care of each other, yeah?”
His eyes widened. “Uh, sure…okay.”
Oh boy, don’t tell me he really is the oblivious protagonist type? Had he still not realized how Noelle felt? Give me a break.
“Well, take it easy,” I said. “And if you’re in any pain, let Marie know.”
“Yes, thank you for everything.”
Jean bowed his head low, then took off. As I watched him go, my thoughts turned to the next step.
Namely, sucking the republic’s treasury dry. They owe me compensation!

***

Louise answered her father’s summons and entered his study. As soon as she closed the door, Albergue began questioning her about the incident with Pierre.
“What exactly were you thinking?”
Louise stared at her feet. Her father didn’t sound entirely reproachful, probably because he knew that fault truly lay with the republic. However, he was still nobility, and it was his duty to censure Louise for her part in the fiasco.
“You have an obligation to prioritize Alzer’s well-being,” he told her.
“Yes,” Louise said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I understand.”
“I realize Pierre went too far,” said Albergue. “But that outsider—the Holfortian—stole a sapling of the Sacred Tree. He still has it even now. And

what was that ship called again? The *Einhorn*? That vessel poses an unmistakable threat."

Honestly, Albergue wanted to get his hands on those items, and right now, Leon had them both. Although Leon had agreed to negotiate, the republic was clearly at a disadvantage.

Louise said, "If you meet Leon, you'll understand."

Albergue's eyes narrowed. "Leon is dead," he snapped. "You know that. I won't tell you to forget about him, but remember what your attitude has done to Serge."

Louise clenched her fists and bit her bottom lip, trying to hold back the tears.

It's odd to see her this fixated on someone, Albergue thought.

Louise could be a bit of a tomboy, but she was level-headed and mature for her age. Considering her actions over the past few days, perhaps she was shouldering a larger burden than he had realized.

"You know how things are with Serge," he said. "You need to stop talking about Leon."

"You don't have to explain it to me."

"Then you may leave."

As Louise slipped out of Albergue's office, he heaved a deep sigh. He put his elbows on his desk and rested his chin on his folded hands. "All of this seems suspicious."

He unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out the picture frame within. In the photograph, a black-haired, five-year-old boy grinned back at the camera. A young Louise was hugging the boy from behind. The boy's name was Leon Sara Rault, and he had been Albergue's son. He had died of an illness not long after this photo had been taken.

"Everything would be so different if you were still with us, Leon." Albergue murmured. *If he were still alive, he would be about the same age as Earl Bartfort.*

But such wistful thoughts only made Albergue hate himself.

"If only Serge would settle down a little," he grumbled. His adopted son had yet to return to the academy.

Albergue stowed the picture back in the drawer and returned to his paperwork.

***

The next day, Albergue arrived at the agreed-upon location to negotiate with Leon. When he saw the boy, he could hardly hide his shock.

Beside him, Fernand frowned with concern. "Acting Chairman? Is something bothering you?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

Albergue played it off, but he finally understood why Louise had gone out of her way for this boy. Leon looked *exactly* as he imagined his late son would

have appeared now. Black hair and black eyes weren't all that uncommon, but even the atmosphere around this boy reminded Albergue of his son.

Leon stood with his head held high and the sapling in his hands, oblivious to what was happening. "Huh? What'd you just say?"

Lambert's face turned purple. "Don't make me repeat myself! I said my house suffered terrible damages thanks to *your* ship! I demand reimbursement!"

"Sorry, can't hear you!" Leon sang. He showed no sign of listening to any of them.

While the other house leaders were visibly irritated, they were also on guard. After all, Leon had a sapling of the Sacred Tree in his possession.

Did Louise tell him about the saplings?

Leon stood in a room full of people with divine protection, but he didn't seem the slightest bit intimidated. Albergue couldn't discern whether his attitude was a product of ignorance or whether he understood the circumstances all too well.

"It seems like you guys wanna pin this all on me," said Leon. "But…are you *really* sure you wanna do that?"

"Why shouldn't we? It's clearly all your fault!"

"Lord Lambert, let us listen to what the boy has to say," Albergue said. They wouldn't get anywhere with Lambert babbling on. "Earl Bartfort, do you mean to say that our accusations are misplaced?"

"Obviously. Pierre tricked us into making some kinda oath to the Sacred Tree and put a cursed collar-thing on our prince. Not only that, he stole my ship and used it to make a mess of your territory. But you're acting like this is all on me? I was the one who stopped the *Einhorn* from doing any more damage than it already had, and here you are, rewarding my kindness with contempt."

Leon grinned from ear to ear as he laid out his argument. It was difficult to tell what he was really thinking.

"Anyway," he continued. "Enough preamble. The real question is: Are you guys truly prepared for the consequences of deciding this is my fault?"

"What rubbish is this?!" Lambert snapped.

The other lords silenced him with a glare.

Leon smirked. "A single ship almost wiped you out. If you blame Pierre, well, it's a stain on his reputation, for sure. But, if you blame *me,* then all that talk about how the republic is undefeated goes out the window."

"I'm not so sure about that," Fernand cut in. "You never actually *fought* in the battle, and it was never *truly* concluded. At best, you could call it a draw."

Leon saw right through that point. "Then go ahead and blame me. But the second you do, it's curtains for the republic. Do you realize how many ships the *Einhorn* sank? And you guys couldn't lift a finger to stop it. You wanna find out how many ships just like it are waiting back in the kingdom?"

"Seems the Hero of Holfort has a short fuse," Fernand snapped.

"If my fuse really *was* short, House Feivel and all its lands would be drowning in fire right about now."

Lambert balled his fists.

Albergue stepped forward to take over the negotiations. "I understand what you're saying. What is it that you want from us?"

"Monetary compensation. Although valuable items would suffice. Include some hush money on top of the damages, and I'll recognize this whole fiasco as republic infighting. Of course, I also expect an official apology."

"I see."

Leon would protect their pride and honor—as long as they paid him for it.

Lambert slammed his fists on the table. "You're trying to take us for a ride! We have never once lost to the kingdom!"

Leon's smile didn't falter. "You want to see what we're really capable of next time? Do I need to remind you that your republic has only ever gone undefeated in *defensive* battles? Oh, wait, but if you're blaming *me* for this, you can't even say that, can you? Guess you're not so unbeatable anymore!"

The other lords grimaced.

If they admitted that the kingdom had beaten them, their international reputation would suffer. And if it turned out that other countries were creating stronger airships en masse, then the republic really couldn't solve its problems with war.

Nevertheless, Albergue saw this as a golden opportunity. *Hm. Not bad. In fact, this works out in my favor.*

"Very well," he said. "The republic will compensate you for your troubles."

Fernand bristled. "Acting Chairman, do you truly intend to accept his demands?"

It was admittedly a dubious call as chairman, but it benefited Albergue personally, and he had his own objectives. He silently apologized to his daughter.

Louise, this must be how you felt. He did feel a twinge of regret. He had gone easy on Leon simply because the boy reminded him of his own son. He had no right to blame Louise for doing the same.

Leon's eyes widened. "Wait, you're really going to agree?"

"Surprised?"

"Well, yeah, actually."

All Leon's bluster from moments ago had faded, providing Albergue a glimpse of a more mild-mannered boy underneath.

"You and the other exchange students have had quite a poor experience in our country. I wish to apologize for that. And I have my own personal proposal to make."

***

Once the negotiations were over, Fernand pressed Albergue to reconsider.

“Acting Chairman, respectfully, this will only help the kingdom. Please rethink your decision.” Fernand was young and talented, but he was also deeply patriotic. When it came to anything that might disadvantage the republic, he was rather sensitive.

“It’s a small loss,” said Albergue. “You needn’t worry so over it. Besides, it presents us with the perfect opportunity for reform.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“We can no longer afford to rely on the Sacred Tree for so many of our needs. It’s simply backward.”

Fernand gaped. “That’s a rather controversial statement, isn’t it?”

“How so? Our confidence in the Sacred Tree has led us to look down on our neighbors. It’s no wonder we have such a poor reputation. If nothing else, we need to be warier.”

Fernand couldn’t argue with that. “Very well, but do you truly think it’s wise to invite Bartfort to your estate? He was practically taunting us.”

“He has the sapling. We needed another opportunity for further negotiation,” Albergue explained.

“I understand the necessity, but I fail to see why the responsibility falls to you.”

“Let’s just say that I have a personal interest.” Albergue was throwing out excuses, and honestly? He just wanted a chance to speak with Leon privately. *I know he’s not my son, but I can’t shake my fascination. Maybe it’s solely because they’re so similar.*

What would his son have been like if he had grown to Bartfort’s age? Albergue couldn’t help but think back on years long past.

***

A few days after negotiations concluded, I made good on House Rault’s invitation to visit their home. The republic had already compensated me for everything that had happened, and government officials had taken over discussions between Alzer and the kingdom.

Roland must be squirming.

I wasn’t about to get involved—it was the perfect opportunity for me to sit back and enjoy the show.

House Rault went out of their way to welcome me, sending an airship to ferry me to their home. Their stronghold was nestled inside a fortified city, and the atmosphere was incredibly different there.

“It’s like their own little country,” I murmured.

“Master,” Luxion whispered in my ear. “The odds of an assassination attempt here are minimal, but please remain vigilant.”

He was using a cloaking device to mask his presence and had investigated the whole castle while we waited in a reception room. He’d even made sure that the food wasn’t poisoned. It seemed House Rault’s invitation was genuine after all.

“Are they trying to charm me so that I’ll give them the sapling?”
“Yes, I believe that’s probable. Or perhaps they are interested in discussing our technology. Regardless, the situation is…unusual.”
“Unusual? How so?”
“All the servants who saw you looked shaken. The older ones were particularly baffled.”
I’d noticed this with the ones who’d guided us to the reception room. They had almost looked shocked when they saw me.
“Miss Louise was thrown off when she first looked at me too. And I remember her asking me to call her ‘Big Sis’ or something.”
“I wouldn’t have thought a woman like her would nurture such eccentric proclivities.”
“Hey, if I could swap her for Jenna, that wouldn’t be so bad.”
My jerkbag sister was probably having a rough time back in the kingdom. Even the thought of her made my eyes well with bitter tears. If someone really did offer to swap her for Miss Louise, I might just jump at the opportunity.
While I chatted with Luxion, someone came to inform me that the meal was ready.

***

The dining room had an insanely high ceiling, and the four of us sat down at an enormous table. Something about this felt strange. Servants bustled around, laying out our meal. Mr. Albergue was seated across from me, with his wife on one side and Miss Louise on the other. Both women were wearing dresses. It gave the meal an almost royal atmosphere.
The food was a bit cold, but it was delicious.
“Does it suit your palate?” Mr. Albergue asked.
“It’s amazing,” I admitted. “The sauce is different from anything in the kingdom, but I like it.”
Each nation had its own range of flavors, but I had no problem with the republic’s cuisine. The meat was tender and accompanied by a variety of veggies I had never seen. I tried them, but the flavor definitely didn’t agree with me. I could still swallow them down, but I wasn’t eager to have them again. I tried to mask the disgusting flavor by combining them with the meat and realized that the other three were staring at me.
“Uh…did I do something wrong?”
Mr. Albergue’s raised his eyebrows in surprise. “N-no, it’s not that. Are you…not fond of vegetables?”
Apparently, my distaste had shown on my face. “I’ve never had these before. They have a real unique bitterness that’s kinda hard to stomach, but I can manage.”
Mr. Albergue looked flustered. “Oh, really…”
As I eyed him suspiciously, his wife burst into tears.

“I’m sorry. Please excuse me.” She stood up and left. Several servants followed after her.
“I’m sorry about that,” Miss Louise said. “She’ll return in just a moment, I’m sure. Please understand, she doesn’t have anything against you.”
“Then what’s the problem?” I asked.
This whole situation was putting me on edge.
Mr. Albergue stared down at his lap. “I had a son.”
“You mean Serge?”
“No, I mean my biological son. His name was…Leon.”
This was the first I had heard of it, but it *did* explain a lot of things. Like why Miss Louise was always so receptive to my requests.
“Oh,” I said. “I never realized.”
“I hope you won’t take offense. We never dreamed we would meet someone who so closely resembles him.”
“Well, they do say that statistically, everyone’s got like two doppelgangers out in the world.” I shrugged. “It’s just a coincidence.”
Mr. Albergue smiled sadly. “I suppose so.”
Miss Louise glanced at me and grinned. “Leon…I mean, my younger brother…he also hated those vegetables. He would force himself to eat them, though, just like you did. It must have brought a wave of memories back for my mother.”
He had been only five when he died. Come to think of it, that’s how old I had been when I regained the memories from my previous life.
Surely it was all just a coincidence…right?
“By the way,” I said, “Serge hasn’t been coming to the academy, has he? Where is he?” I’d noticed his absence at the table.
Louise’s expression clouded. “He stormed out during spring break and hasn’t come back. We get messages from him every now and again, so we know he’s alive.”
“So…he’s just hanging out somewhere?”
“He’s a troublesome one,” Mr. Albergue mumbled. He turned toward me. “I hear adventuring is a legitimate profession in the kingdom, but the same cannot be said of the republic.”
Here, adventurers were at the lower end of the hierarchy.
“Serge longs to be an adventurer. He even takes a ship out on breaks so he can go exploring. Perhaps you can understand where he’s coming from.”
“I suppose I can. I am where I am because of my success as an adventurer.”
Although in my case, I’d had no choice. My life had been in danger. I had no idea what would drive a rich brat to go off adventuring. The pure thrill of it? If anyone could understand, it would be Julius and his bozo brigade.
“I’m sure he’d get along swimmingly with Prince Julius and his friends.”
“Perhaps I should consult with them and arrange a meeting,” said Albergue.
Miss Louise frowned. “I will not acknowledge Serge’s predilection. He *cannot* be an adventurer. It’s ridiculous. He’s the heir of our house.”
“Louise,” her father scolded. “That’s disrespectful to Leon.”

“O-oh, I’m sorry.”
“It doesn’t bother me. But doesn’t the fact that he hasn’t returned to the academy cause problems?” His absence certainly screwed with our plans. It was worth finding out why he was playing hooky.
Miss Louise dropped her gaze. “He’s just being rebellious. Trying to cause trouble for us.”
“Louise, enough of that. My apologies for exposing my family’s issues like this, Leon.”
“Not at all,” I said, returning to my meal.
I can’t believe that I look like his dead son. At least now I understand why Miss Louise was asking me to call her “Big Sis.” Looks like they have some deep-seated issues with Serge too.

***

The moment I got back, Marie started whining. “I’m so jealous! Why didn’t *I* get to enjoy some luxurious dining?”
I’d been staying at her estate for a few weeks now, and my days were far noisier than they’d been when I lived alone.
“I didn’t go there for fun,” I reminded her.
“But it *was* luxurious, right?”
“It absolutely was.”
Marie bit her lip, vexed by my answer.
I held out a cake. “Here, a souvenir.”
“Yay! Older brothers are the best!”
She was pretty easy to placate these days, considering the fact that a cake was all it took to improve her mood. If she was this simply pleased, then I couldn’t understand how she’d managed to take those five idiots for a ride and mess up their lives so badly.
We headed to my room, and Marie carried the cake along with her as I set about preparing tea.
“Where’s Luxion?” she asked.
“Performing repairs on the *Einhorn*. He’s brought his main body to lurk over the capital, so the *Einhorn* should be as good as new in a few days.”
He’d also mentioned overhauling Arroganz—clearing off those gaudy decorations and thoroughly sanitizing the cockpit that Pierre had occupied. With the *Einhorn*, the biggest issue was the trashed interior. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to say Luxion was cleaning and redecorating.
“You mean he hadn’t brought his ship here already?”
“It was hovering on the border between the kingdom and the republic so he could relay messages for me. However, after everything that’s happened, it seemed best to move. I won’t be able to send any emails to Angie and Livia in the meantime.”

There was so much interference that it was impossible to send messages without transmitting them through Luxion's ship. I hoped Angie and Livia were doing all right.
Marie pulled the cake out of its box, her eyes lighting up. "It looks delicious!"
"Make sure you save some for the others."
"Yeah, yeah. I'm not a kid," she said, waiting patiently for me to serve the tea. "Are talks with the republic bigwigs going smoothly?"
"They are. Almost worryingly so. House Rault seems to have taken a liking to me." It was still hard for me to believe I resembled Leon Rault so closely.
"You sure that's safe? Their leader is the final boss of this game."
"I'm keeping my guard up."
I finished pouring tea, and we dug into the cake. I watched Marie for a moment before slipping a hand into my pocket and taking out a manila envelope.
"This is for you."
Her eyes went wide as saucers. She snatched it away from me even more greedily than the cake. "Ah, I know what this is!"
"Yep, it's the money I siphoned from the republic. Well, not much more than pocket change to me."
It was a reward for her hard work, but it was also sympathy money. The way she'd been living was miserable. It almost brought me to tears seeing how hard she scrimped and saved to cover household expenses and the jerk squad's other needs.
Marie slid the notes out from the envelope and started counting. "Oh, holy crap. Are you sure I can have this?!"
I had given her ten million in the republic's currency. Sadly, that would hardly be enough to cover her time studying abroad. Not when she had to pay for those idiots too.
"You guys worked hard this time. Use it wisely."
Marie tucked her money into her pocket and launched herself at me. Tears burst from her eyes as she threw her arms around my shoulders.
"Big Broooo! Thank yoooou!"



I tried to pry myself away. “L-Let go of me! Jeez, you’re every bit the gold digger you were back in Japan.”

She wiped away her tears. “Now I won’t have to worry about our summer uniforms.”

That’s right. The seasons are changing.

“I hear the republic is chock full of summer activities. We’ll have to keep our guard up. Lelia might become the Priestess, but Noelle could still land the position instead.”

Marie counted the bills again, then paused and tilted her head. “Why do you think Noelle is a candidate?”

“Hm? Because she likes Jean, of course. Although he seems pretty oblivious. I don’t think he’s realized how she feels about him. It might be hard for them to start dating. Although I guess we could give them a shove in the right direction.”

It’s one thing to be an oblivious protagonist, but I wish Jean had more of a will of his own. If he likes her, he should just tell her.

“Um, you know…”

“What?”

“I don’t think she sees him that way. I mean, she likes him, but it’s not love.”

“Huh? But they’re so close.”

“Duh, they’re friends. But she doesn’t really think of him as a member of the opposite sex.”

What was Marie on about?

“Okaaay,” I said. “But Jean seems to be pretty hung up on her.”

“Yeah? They just look like friends from where I’m standing. And anyway, are you *really* telling me you haven’t realized? You’re pulling my leg, right?”

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Wait. You mean they’re *actually* just friends?”

Her gaze went cold. “Oh, forget it.”

“No, tell me! I wanna know!”

Marie slipped the cash back into her pocket and resumed picking at her cake. “I’m not telling you anything. It’ll only cause a headache. Also, I think you should seriously consider what you’re going to do now. If you keep living in the same house as Noelle, you’ll be digging your own grave, you know?”

Digging my own grave? I balked. “Hold up. Do you think I’ve fallen for her? I hate to burst your bubble, but I already have two girls back home. And no, I haven’t cheated on them.”

Marie snorted. “I hope you’re right about that. If you’re not, then I don’t want to deal with the mess.”

What was her problem? And what exactly was she trying to say?

Epilogue

CURTIS, ONE OF THE scholarship students at Holfort Academy, wandered into the men's restroom. He intended to straighten his hair at the mirror, but someone else had beaten him to it.

"Oh, it's you. You're—"

The other man panicked, shoving something into his pocket. "N-no, it's not what you think, I swear!"

Curtis chuckled, feeling relieved. "Hey, I would never blame another guy for good grooming."

He assumed that the other man, Aaron, was here for the same reason that he was. But when Aaron started blushing, Curtis got the feeling that something was off.

It looked like he was just combing his hair, but his lips are all glossy.

Aaron wasn't using lipstick, but his mouth *did* look shiny for a dude. His hairstyle was odd too. When Curtis had seen him previously, Aaron had gone for a more rough-and-tumble look, but now his hair looked carefully styled. Even his uniform was neat and perfectly buttoned. Aaron's wild attitude hadn't endeared him to Curtis in the past, but he looked more clean-cut and respectable now.

When Aaron realized that Curtis was staring at his lips, he panicked. "Th-this is just lip cream!"

"Lip cream?"

"You know, for dried lips? I was just slathering some on, that's all."

"O-oh, okay." Curtis scrunched up his face, concerned. It's not even winter and his lips still get chapped? Must be tough.

"S-sorry," Aaron said, beating a retreat. "Toodle-loo!"

Toodaloo? Something about that word felt off. There was no rule against a guy saying it, but the way Aaron said it sounded weirdly feminine.

As Curtis watched Aaron leave, he heard something else that struck him as odd. "Hm?"

Aaron must have run into someone he knew outside.

"Aaron, you're looking beautiful today."

"I bet you say that to everyone."

Question marks popped up over Curtis's head.

Uh, what's going on? Why does Aaron sound all buddy-buddy with this guy? He was only ever interested in skirt chasing before…

Curtis had seen him hanging with some other school delinquents, trying to hit on girls. Yeah, there was definitely something odd about Aaron's current behavior.

Come to think of it, it seems like he only hangs out with dudes lately. Don't tell me…

A shiver ran down his spine.

***

Despite the early hour, Marie's estate was already noisy.
A drowsy Greg slumped across the table. "Is breakfast not ready yet?" he whined.
"It would be ready much faster if you helped us," Kyle huffed.
"My specialty is eating food, not making it. Besides, why don't you pick on Bartfort?"
I was lounging about waiting for breakfast, just like him.
Kyle shook his head. "The earl is a separate matter. He's covering the cost of our meal."
Don't underestimate the power of money! Now Kyle can't get mad at me for not helping.
As we waited in the dining hall, Julius and Jilk wandered in.
"Remind me," said the prince, "what's our schedule for today?"
"We have to visit the embassy for questioning. The kingdom has sent a team to investigate the incident."
We hadn't even eaten yet, and they were already talking about work.
Brad came down next, still on the mend. "What are we having this morning?" he asked as Carla carried in some plates.
She rounded on him. "Please don't get in my way! All of you, to your seats!"
She and Kyle bustled in and out of the dining hall, and Marie and Noelle's voices echoed from the kitchen.
"Noelle, please take care of that!"
"Gotcha!"
Despite her appearance, Noelle was actually pretty savvy with chores.
Guess this is what you'd call gap moe, huh?
As we bided our time, Chris waltzed in covered in sweat. "That was a good workout."
Greg glanced over at him. "I feel overheated just lookin' at you," he scoffed. "Go take a shower."
"What about you? You still look half-asleep. Why don't you go wash your face instead of running your mouth?"
While the two of them bristled at each another, Brad simply shrugged. "Lively as always, I see. Guess it's not surprising, coming from those two meatheads."
But that only made him their target.
"Perhaps you should train a little more yourself."
"You said it. Then maybe he wouldn't have gotten so beaten up."
Brad jabbed a finger at them. "Are you trying to say you two could have done any better?!"
As the dining hall erupted with noise, Marie scuttled in carrying a frying pan and a ladle. She banged them together to get everyone's attention.

"Quiet, all of you! Breakfast is coming, so you better eat it without any complaints!"
She looked like a daycare worker wrangling a bunch of unruly children. She and her helpers brought out corn soup and toast that looked oddly familiar.
"Ah, I know what this is," I said, staring down at it.
It was a breakfast exactly how our mom used to make it, back in Japan. There was a fried egg and two slices of bacon, arranged exactly as I remembered. Nostalgia welled in my chest.
So Marie actually learned to cook just like our mom.
Noelle slid up beside me. "Here," she said. "We have extra bacon."
"Really? Are you sure?"
"Yeah! It's no big deal."
I was the only one who got an extra slice, and that didn't go unnoticed.
Julius bit into his toast, eyes filled with envy. "So only Bartfort gets special treatment? Wish I could get the same."
It was pretty pathetic for a prince to whine over an extra slice of bacon.
"You must have eaten pretty well when you lived at the palace, right? You can suck it up for just one meal."
"All of Marie's cooking is new and inventive. Plus, it's delicious!"
I was at a loss for how to respond to his gag-worthy praise.
I glanced at Marie as she returned from the kitchen with a fresh piece of toast, having already polished off her eggs and bacon. How did she manage to fit second helpings into that petite body?
"Ooooh! I can't believe how smoothly this jam spreads," she crooned. "And it was only a little more expensive than what we usually buy!" There were several jars on the table, and she had selected her favorite. "Ahh, nothing beats having jam options. This is true happiness."
Okay, that made me want to cry. "If that's what you call happiness, then just how bad has your life been here?"
Back in Japan, she'd extorted money from me before going off on a luxury trip overseas. She sure was easier to please now.
Carla clasped her hands. "Lady Marie, I'd like the orange jam!"
"Sure. Make sure to slather it on thick. We have plenty to go around!"
Kyle reached for the blueberry. "Yes, it truly is freeing not to have to worry about our next meal."
Why did I always feel like sobbing whenever I ate with these guys?! I just need to turn off my mind and enjoy the food. It reminds me of home.
Noelle peered at me. "Leon, you have a bit of food on your face."
"Yeah? It's fine. I'll wipe it off when I'm done."
She dabbed at my mouth with a napkin. "Nuh-uh. You're an earl. You need to act like one."
Huh, she's got a nurturing side. I like that. If I weren't already engaged, I might have fallen for her.
"This toast is delicious," Julius said in between bites. "But the crumbs get everywhere."

Jilk nodded solemnly. “I must agree, Your Highness. Is there no cleaner way to go about this?”
Meanwhile, Greg scarfed his toast down without blinking an eye. “Don’t worry about it. Eat up!”
The breakfast table sure was lively this morning.
Noelle laughed.
“What is it?” I asked.
“I like it here. I used to eat breakfast with my sister, but I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.”
“Did something happen between you two?”
Noelle pursed her lips. “You know, this and that. Lelia’s just worried about me, that’s all.”
I wasn’t sure what she meant. They might have been twins, but I guessed they still had their differences, just like anyone else.

***

Marie’s mansion was luxurious, and it even came with a reception room for entertaining guests. The room was perfectly furnished, with a coffee table sandwiched between two sofas.
The embassy had arranged it all. It made sense, since the former crown prince was living here. They sure knew how to keep up appearances. Sure, my estate had some of the same stuff, but it wasn’t nearly as opulent.
I was currently in the aforementioned reception room, serving tea to our guest. “H-here you go,” I said.
“Wonderful. I was feeling a bit parched.”
The woman took a seat and reached gracefully for the cup, taking a sip. Anyone who didn’t know her would have assumed she was a pampered noble. This girl (or lady, perhaps, since she had already graduated from the academy) had blonde hair styled in ringlets that cascaded down her shoulders. Her name was Deirdre Fou Roseblade, and she was an acquaintance of mine.
“It’s been a while since you made tea for me. Have you improved a bit?”
It really must taste good. Flattery isn’t really her style.
“Perhaps it’s the tea leaves here in the republic?” I suggested.
“Indeed. In which case, I should consider taking some home with me,” she said, sipping happily.
But why is she here? I honestly had no idea. “Uh, so…are you here to sightsee?”
Miss Deirdre smiled. “Oh, pardon my manners. I’m actually here on business. His Majesty requested I visit to see how things are proceeding. Speaking of which, he entrusted me with a letter for you.”
I took the envelope, slit it open, and glanced over the contents.

You did a splendid job causing trouble in the republic, you rotten little brat. We already lack the manpower over here, so we've had to employ fresh graduates to carry some of the load. I hear you're acquainted with the girl I'm sending. Hope you two get along! Just know that, if you cheat, I'll be sure to tell Duke Redgrave what a two-timing snake you are.
Sincerely,

Your Amazing and Incredible King

My face betrayed no emotion as I tore the letter in half.

Miss Deirdre seemed to sense what was written in it. She grinned. "You two really are close, aren't you?"

I laughed at the absurdity of that idea, but the emotion soon drained from my face. "Yes, we're *so* close that we want to sock each other in the face."

Man, I wish I could punch him right now.

At least that explained why Miss Deirdre was here—to aid in the investigation. Despite the issues with her personality, she seemed genuinely devoted to performing her task.

"I already got the gist of things from the embassy," she said. "The son of one of the Six Great Houses provoked you, so you challenged him to a duel and gave him the beating of a lifetime. Ah, it makes my whole body tremble with excitement." Her cheeks flushed, and she pressed her index finger to her lips.

Pervert.

"They don't call you the Hero of Holfort for nothing. You put the Six Great Houses in their place and improved the kingdom's status. A splendid contribution. My heart hasn't fluttered like this in a while."

I had no idea what to say to that. "Uh…so you just came here today to say hi?"

"Why, of course not. I brought you a gift. Surely you want to know how the republic is handling this matter, don't you? I have exclusive information. Something that an exchange student like yourself would not normally be privy to."

So she's going to clue me in to what she learned since arriving here. I had Luxion gathering intel already, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. "I hope it's something entertaining, at least," I said.

"Holfort requested they hand over Pierre, since he put a curse on Prince Julius, but the republic rejected us outright."

"His house is protecting him, huh?" That seemed the most likely reason.

Miss Deirdre snickered. "You have a good relationship with your family, don't you? I can tell."

"Huh? Not really. I'm definitely not close with my sisters. They're—"

"Pierre was trying to kick out his older brother so he could inherit. When his brother learned of that, he was enraged."

Now, in the republic's terminology, Pierre was classified as Unprotected, and his peers scorned him for it. If he ever had any children, they wouldn't

receive the Sacred Tree’s blessing either. This effectively nullified his noble status. He couldn’t even enter into a political marriage. It was all just as I’d planned.
“Did they imprison him? Or are they claiming he’s ‘taken ill’ or something?”
Miss Deirdre averted her eyes and twisted a lock of hair between her fingers. “They claim he took his life to repent for his crimes. Given how enraged his family was, I suspect they’re actually torturing him in their basement.”
“The nobles here don’t even show mercy to their own families.”
“Holfort is no better.”
She had to be referring to the nobility’s darker side. I wanted no part of that.
“You knew what would happen to him, didn’t you?” Deirdre asked.
I would have been lying if I said I didn’t feel a little guilty, but ultimately, the responsibility fell on Pierre. “He brought it on himself, right? He messed with our idiot prince, so we had to get even. He was the one who started all this.”
Miss Deirdre was a noble herself, and she was pleased with my answer. “Good. If you’d said that you never meant for things to go so far, I would have slapped you.”
Livia, on the other hand…she’d probably be pissed at me.
“It seems the academy schedule will resume without issue,” Miss Deirdre went on. “You and the others will continue to attend, as before. Though I would advise caution.”
“I’m sure you’re not directing that at me.”
“There’s no one else here. *Of course* I’m directing it at you. Once I’ve given my report to the kingdom, I’ll be coming right back. Although, someone else will be employed for the real negotiations.”
That made sense. This was an international issue and required a proper official. My negotiations with the Six Great Houses were purely personal.
Miss Deirdre lifted herself out of her seat. “Sadly, I am a busy woman, so I will have to excuse myself. Oh! I nearly forgot.” She pulled out two letters and passed them to me. “Make sure to contact those two. They were worried sick about you.”

***

Mr. Leon, are you doing well? I hope you’re not hurt or sick. Are you eating okay?

Tears pricked at my eyes as I read Livia’s letter. The one from Angie was just as moving. She asked me to run straight back home if anything bad happened. That came as a surprise—most nobles would be more concerned with appearances than my well-being.

Luxion peered over, looking almost apologetic. “I will not be able to field any correspondence for a time.”
While his ship had straddled the border between the two countries, we had been able to trade messages with the kingdom. But now that he’d moved closer, the mana was so dense here that it disrupted his signal.
“Such is life. But since you brought it up, when will you be able to move back?”
“Depends on how things play out here. I remain on standby to service and resupply the *Einhorn* and Arroganz.”
“Guess I should write another letter by hand,” I said. “And send them a souvenir while I’m at it.”
“I believe that would be wise.”
I plopped down in my chair and stared up at the ceiling.
“Concerned about Pierre?” Luxion asked.
“Nah, he made his bed. Now he gets to lie in it.”
All the evil he’d sowed was coming back to haunt him. I had no sympathy for that jerk, though I couldn’t deny I’d driven him into his current predicament.
“Master, to be honest, there is one thing that’s weighing on—”
Before he could finish, Marie burst through the door. “Big Brooooo!”
I glared at her. “Learn to knock.”
“No worries. I have no interest in whatever you do in your alone time. Uh, anyway! Y-you have a guest!”
“Seriously? Again?” I frowned. *Who could it be this time?*
Marie flailed her arms around. “It’s Lelia! And get this: She reincarnated here too!”
I stared at her blankly, unable to process what she was saying. “She what?”

***

I arrived in the reception room to find Noelle waiting.
“Oh, Leon.”
Whatever she and Lelia had been talking about moments before, it couldn’t have been good. Noelle’s expression was clouded over, and Lelia was glaring at us. It wasn’t until she spotted Luxion hovering over my shoulder that her eyes widened. Judging by how she kept her guard up, she knew *exactly* what he was.
“Noelle,” I said. “Do you mind if we talk to your little sister for a bit?”
“No, go for it.”
She glanced at Lelia, who folded her arms and crossed her legs as if this was what she’d been waiting for.



“There’s plenty I’d like to discuss with you, as well,” said Lelia. “It seems you’ve been taking good care of my older sister.”
“Okay,” Noelle warned her twin before she left the room. “But be nice.”
Marie pulled a face as she glanced between Lelia and me.
“So, you reincarnated here?” I asked.
“That’s right,” said Lelia. “As the protagonist’s twin sister. I had everything planned out too. Until you made a mess of it all.”
I sank down onto the couch, and Marie took her spot beside me. “I apologize for that.”
Luxion stared at Lelia. “Well? What did you come here for?”
She peered at him for a moment before turning to me. “Why do you have a cheat item?”
“Because I worked hard to retrieve it.”
“Well, whatever. Doesn’t matter.” She frowned and then moved on to her real reason for coming. “I’d like my sister back, along with the sapling.”
“Come again?” Marie scoffed. She was even more pissed off than I was. “And why should we take orders from you?”
“The sapling will wilt without my sister, since she’s the one with the aptitude to become Priestess. Don’t you even know that much? If that sapling dies, it’ll screw up the whole story line!”
As much as that bothered Lelia, I couldn’t have cared less. Well, except that there was one thing that ate at me. “Hold on a sec. Don’t you have the aptitude too?”
Lelia sniffed. “No. Only Noelle.”
A cold sweat ran down Marie’s forehead. “Wait, wait. But you’re twins, right? Shouldn’t you be just as qualified? You could split it evenly, you know, like how each of you has a side ponytail instead of one Lespinasse heir with twintails.”
“Our hair has nothing to do with this!” Lelia snapped. “Before House Lespinasse fell, our parents told us that only Noelle could become Priestess. She’s the protagonist, not me.”
I glanced over at Luxion.
“The information I have obtained from the Six Great Houses states that the Priestess is chosen by her bloodline,” he said.
Lelia shook her head. “The Priestess acts as a link between the people and the Sacred Tree. My mother was the previous Priestess, and my father was the Guardian. They said that isn’t how it works, and if anyone would know, it’s them. Simple as that.”
Marie and I both held our heads.
“This can’t be. Our plan just went right out the window.”
“Luxion, you lying jerk!”
Lelia scowled at us. “Do you have any idea how much effort went into my plan? My house was destroyed in a fire when I was a child, and I was chased out of my home. I’ve spent all these years looking after my sister until we

got to the academy. It was exhausting. I thought the world would be safe once I set her up with Loic."

Well, that raised a few red flags.

"Hold up. Don't tell me you've been riling up Loic?"

"I did. He's vital to the true ending. They're fated for each other."

By true ending, I assumed she meant the canonical end of the game. So that involved Loic pairing up with Noelle?

I pulled a face.

"What?" Lelia asked. "Got a problem?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. Noelle hates Loic's guts."

I shot Marie a look, wanting her to back me up.

"Yeah. Loic's not even a possibility," she agreed. "I mean, she *really* hates him. Like, we're talking viscerally disgusted. She can't even stomach the idea. I don't think you're going to have any luck pairing those two together."

Oof. If someone I liked told me they were "viscerally disgusted" by me, I'd probably hole up in my room for three days. Surely Lelia could understand where her sister was coming from.

"B-but in the game, my sister and Loic—"

"If this world followed the script perfectly," Marie said, sounding pained, "none of us would have to suffer."

She knew about that firsthand. I did feel for a her a little.

"Yeah, you went through a lot," I agreed. "Mainly because you went down the reverse harem route and failed spectacularly."

Marie wiped her tears on her sleeve. "Don't remind me. I already regret it."

Lelia wrinkled her nose. "Seriously? You actually tried for the reverse harem route? Ugh. What a loser. Who even does that?"

"Oh, shut up!" Marie snapped. "It's human nature to seize happiness when you see it just lying around. Besides, you're the one who went for Easy-Pick Emile! You can't judge me!"

"Excuse me? My intentions were sincere. I only chose *one* guy!"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh. You chose him because he's rich and comes from a nice family, right? Sincere my butt."

This was turning into a cat fight.

"Well, at least I didn't take *all* the love interests for myself!"

"Oh, please! You may have targeted a single guy, but you're doing the same thing!"

"Don't compare us!"

It quickly escalated. The two of them hopped out of their seats and grabbed at each other's clothes and hair, hurling insults back and forth.

I shook my head. "Yikes."

"I am afraid I must echo the sentiment," said Luxion.

When the girls were exhausted and gasping for air, I saw an opportunity to end it.

“Well, anyway…we basically all want to avoid the end of the world. So, why don’t we cooperate?”
Lelia was in the same boat as us. Since we’d all reincarnated here, it made sense to work together.
Lelia huffed, combing her hair back down and adjusting her clothes as she and Marie returned to their seats.
“You want to ‘cooperate’? You’re the one who ruined Pierre’s event and split my sister and Loic apart!”
“Sorry,” I said with a shrug, completely insincere. “But he started it. I have my own honor to uphold. As for Loic, his actions were getting dangerous. I thought it best to stop him.”
“Loic is simply a little possessive, that’s all. It’s part of his charm. I’m sure he’ll cool it once he and Noelle are together.”
A little? She thought that was a little?! Clearly women have a different definition of “a little possessive.”
“Anyway,” Lelia continued. “The big problem is that you ruined Pierre’s event scene! And who backs someone into a corner the way you did?! Emile says that Pierre is in some serious hot water!”
Guess she saw our duel. I shrugged. “It’s his fault for picking a fight. I may have backed him into a corner, but he set himself up by being a scumbag. You can’t put that on me. He shouldn’t have been stupid enough to fall into my trap.”
Lelia glared at me. “You really are a pig.”
Marie shot out of her seat. “Pierre hardly seems worthy of empathy! Besides, you really *should* cooperate with us.”
We shared the same objective, so surely we could work together. Lelia seemed displeased, but she didn’t refuse. “For now, just give me the sapling and my sister.”
I pulled out the case with the sapling and set it on the table. I figured it would be pivotal to our discussion, so I’d brought it with me. “You don’t have to worry about that. I put it in a special case, so it won’t be drying up for—hey, wait a sec.”
The back of my right hand had lit up. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it looked like the sapling was glowing too.
“Your hand!” Marie gasped.
There was a seal etched onto my skin. “What the hell?! Hey, someone explain this!”
Lelia gawked in disbelief. “Wh-why do you have the Guardian’s crest?!”
“Oh? The Sacred Tree has a good eye for people,” said Luxion. “It has selected you as its Guardian.”
“Meeeee?!”
Even though the sapling had yet to choose its Priestess, somehow I was its Guardian? That position was meant to go to the protagonist’s love interest. Why had it picked *me*?
This was definitely *not* how any of us had pictured this turning out.

Crap! What happens now?!

***

Back in Holfort Kingdom, Livia and Angie sipped their tea solemnly while Cleare floated nearby.

"That sourpuss Luxion still hasn't contacted us."

Livia frowned, staring down into her lap as she prayed for Leon's safety. "I wonder if our letters reached him."

Angie calmly sipped her tea. She was concerned too. "If nothing else, Deirdre is a woman of her word. She will see he gets them."

Assuming Deirdre was in a position to hand the letters over. The two of them had no idea what the situation was in the republic or what was going on with Leon. They wanted to rush over there and find out, but they'd been ordered to stay put.

"The letters should be with him by now."

The emails Luxion had sent were instantaneous. Unfortunately, regular communication took a little longer.

"Everything will be fine," Cleare assured them. "Master is made of tough stuff, and I can't imagine there's an enemy that Luxion can't beat. I am sure they're just busy cleaning up the mess."

Livia nodded. "I hope you're right."

Angie sighed. "The problem is that Leon can be rash. I wonder what has happened over there."

"If you're that worried," Cleare said, "I'll look into it!"

Livia lifted her head. "You can do that?"

"Yes! I've sent out a relay communicator. Granted, it's not very effective, and it basically amounts to hacking, which Luxion hates."

Angie's calm facade went right out the window. "We'll take whatever we can get! Whatever you can tell us about Leon, we want to know as soon as possible."

"It'll be fragmented, but I can do it."

"That's fine," said Livia. "As long as Leon is safe."

Angie pressed her hands to her chest, praying that he was well.

Cleare proceeded to hack into Luxion. Her blue lens lit up. "All right, let's see what I can find. Luxion's main body is currently located…"

Livia clasped her hands together. "Please let Mr. Leon be safe."

Angie threw an arm around her, squeezing. "It will be okay. Leon is tough."

"Eeeek!" Cleare screeched.

Livia leaped to her feet. "What is it?!"

Angie grabbed Cleare with both hands. "Tell us! Is Leon okay?!"

"Um, I only got my hands on Luxion's logs. Nothing too important."

"A-and?!" Livia leaned closer.

Cleare hesitated, knowing that the truth would only heighten their anxiety. "So, uh, Master is fine. Luxion is with him. Rie and the others are safe too."

Angie and Livia turned to each other, clasping hands. Their enormous breasts squeezed together.
“What a relief, he’s safe!”
“Oh, Angie, I’m so glad!”
Angie and Livia smiled at one another. Neither of them made any mention of Marie or the boys.
“B-but, uh, you see… Master’s actually kinda staying…in the same place as Rie and the others.”
The girls’ faces darkened.
“I’m sure he must have some reason for staying with them,” said Livia. “Right?”
Angie pulled a face. “Yes, I’m sure. The embassy must not have been able to prepare his own place. That’s the only explanation. There’s no other possible reason why he’d stay in the same house as—”
“I can’t be sure,” Cleare interrupted. “Since the information I collected was fragmented, but I *did* pick up something that Luxion was muttering. Uh, he said, ‘This is what they call two-timing.’”
All light left the girls’ eyes, and emotion drained from their faces.

Afterword

WHAT DID YOU THINK of this volume? I hope you enjoyed it! I'm the writer, Yomu Mishima, by the way. Hard to believe we're already at the fourth installment of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs*. It's largely thanks to the support that you've given me! Thank you so much. I hope you will continue to support me as I write toward the story's conclusion.

Now, let's talk about this volume. It takes place in the Alzer Republic, as Leon and Marie deal with the challenges presented by the second game. There are actually some notable differences between the light novel and the web novel this time. For one, there's a new character—the villainess, Louise. She never turns up in the web novel, so she's exclusive to this version of the story. I hope you'll look forward to seeing how her presence impacts Leon and the others.

Next is Noelle. I completely changed how I handled her here. She makes a shocking entrance in the web novel, but here she shows up from the beginning. She's energetic and interacts with Leon as soon as he starts school.

One other difference is her hairstyle. I kinda waited 'til the very last second before I finally made a decision (whoops). In the web version, she still had twintails, but after all was said and done, I decided to switch to a side ponytail. That was all well and good until the illustrator, Monda-sensei, sent me a rough draft with several design options for her. They were all so good that it was hard to choose, and I hesitated until the very end.

I can remember telling my editor, "It's between Option A and Option C. But Option B is also kinda hard to pass up." They were all so cute. I really had a hard time, ha ha!

Lastly is Loic. In the web version, I named him Eric, but there were too many other characters with similar names, so I decided to change it. There wasn't really any deeper reason for that.

There were several other minor changes, but if I listed them all then this afterword would go on forever. Anyway, I hope you will continue supporting the series!

Thank you for reading!